

VOLUME 1

Together or apart? An analysis of social workers' decision-making when considering the placement of siblings for adoption or foster care.

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ABSTRACT

There appears to be little consensus regarding whether siblings fare better if placed together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements. There also appears to be little guidance for the social workers who are required to make decisions of this type. This case study aimed to explore the decision-making of social workers when considering whether to place siblings together or apart. A psychological framework, the Information Processing Approach to human decision-making, was used. I aimed to explore the key pieces of information that social workers attended to, the constraints they faced, which other people influenced their decision-making and what heuristics they relied on when making these decisions. Semi-structured interviews, including the use of two vignettes, were conducted with six social workers working within one Local Authority (LA). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings suggested that social workers attended to information regarding the individual needs of the children, the potentially detrimental effects of separating siblings, and the positive and negative aspects of the sibling relationship. They faced constraints such as their previous experiences as a social worker, their personal experiences of the sibling relationship and associated personal values, their own emotions and a range of systemic issues. The social workers appeared to be influenced by a number of people during the decision-making process, including the children themselves, their carers and a range of professionals. As part of the assessment process, the social workers took into account published research and theories relating to siblings. The social workers also appeared to use a number of

heuristics to aid their decision-making; evidence was found for the use of the confidence heuristic, the familiarity heuristic, the social proof heuristics and the take-the-best heuristic. Implications for future practice within this LA and further research are considered.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, David and Lynda Lee, my brother, William Lee, and my husband, Alex Sharpe, for their continuing love, encouragement and belief in me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This volume presents a research study undertaken as part of the three year professional training programme in Applied Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham (2011-2014). During the second and third years of the programme, I was employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) by a Local Authority (LA) within the West Midlands. The research study presented here was conducted within this LA, and focuses on the decision-making of social workers (SWs) when considering whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or long-term foster care placements.

1.1 Rationale for the research study

The LA in which I have been employed for the last two years influenced the focus of my research study, as it was suggested as an area of potential interest by one of the senior educational psychologists (EPs) working within the Looked After Children (LAC) team. A social worker (SW) within this team had been given a year-long secondment to carry out a piece of research in this area; his aim was to improve practice by encouraging SWs to reflect on their own decision-making when considering whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or long-term foster care placements, and to identify any published guidance or tools that would improve the quality of this decision-making. He was asked to conduct this work as the SWs had been questioned by OFSTED during a recent inspection about how they made these decisions; it emerged that there was little set guidance or consistency in practice between different SWs. The senior EP in the LAC team suggested that I

could conduct a research study alongside this, with an aim of bringing a psychological perspective to this area of work.

As well as being a current LA priority at the time when I was choosing an area to research, the area of adoption and foster care, particularly with reference to the placement of siblings, was receiving increasing attention at a national level. In July 2012, the Government had suggested reforms to the current system and published a discussion paper calling for views on the placement of siblings in adoption and foster-care (Department for Education, 2012a). Thus, the research presented in this volume has both local and national relevance.

Finally, there appears to be little research to date that has explored the decision-making of social workers from a psychological perspective, such as from an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Therefore, it is hoped that this research study will provide a unique contribution to the research in this field.

1.2 Context of the research study

The research was conducted in one LA within the West Midlands. The LA serves a large urban city with a population of approximately 251,000 people.

As of April 2014, there were reported to be over 700 children that were classed as 'Looked After Children' and were in the care of the LA. This number has been increasing year-on-year. There are no statistics available regarding how many of these children are placed with their siblings, as often it is difficult to define who is a

sibling to whom as there may be half-siblings, step-siblings and siblings who have never lived together and may not know of each other's existence.

1.3 Aims of the research study

The research study aims to use an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) to explore the decision-making of SWs when they are considering whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or foster care placements. I aim to explore what pieces of information they attend to, the heuristics, or simplification mechanisms, which they may rely upon, and the constraints they face when making these decisions.

1.4 Key concepts

The Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) is a theoretical and methodological framework for human decision-making. This approach is a descriptive theory, which aims to explore *how* decisions are made by individuals. Payne and Bettman (2004) propose that human decision-making is affected by constraints of the mind (e.g. memory, processing capacity) and the environment (e.g. influence of others, time pressure). Due to these constraints, humans are necessarily selective about the pieces of information they attend to when required to make a decision; our attention can be focused in a voluntary or involuntary manner. Similarly, as humans face constraints when making decisions, they may rely on heuristics (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Heuristics can be thought of as mental shortcuts or simplification mechanisms that allow us to make decisions quickly and

with little effort (Payne & Bettman, 2004). These concepts will be explored in further detail within Chapter 4 of this Volume.

1.5 Research questions

Four research questions were developed, following a review of the relevant literature relating to decision-making and whether siblings should be placed together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements:

1. What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?
2. What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?
3. Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?
4. What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

1.6 Methodology

This research study used a case study approach with a small sample of social workers that worked within the LA and had been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. Semi-structured interviews, comprising the use of two vignettes and a series of questions, were used to explore their decision-making.

1.7 Structure

This Volume is comprised of seven chapters, including this introductory chapter.

The first three chapters form the literature review for the present research study. The literature search was conducted using the University of Birmingham's library online search function ('FindIt@Bham'). This is a powerful search engine which has access to approximately 1,000 electronic databases, 2.7 million books and 50,000 electronic journals (University of Birmingham, 2014). Search terms included: 'siblings and adoption', 'siblings and foster care', 'human decision-making', 'theory of decision-making', and 'social workers' decision-making'. Literature was selected for inclusion in the review if it was published within the last fifteen years, so as to ensure that only the most up-to-date and relevant material was included. Some older literature was included if it was felt to be a seminal paper (i.e. cited regularly in more recent publications) of historical relevance (e.g. Simon, 1955).

Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the literature regarding whether siblings should be placed together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements. A brief commentary is included that highlights some of the limitations of the research conducted in this area to date.

Chapter 3 focuses on the relevant legislation in this area, as well as the guidance currently available to social workers who are required to make decisions regarding the placement of siblings.

Chapter 4 focuses on psychological perspectives on individual decision-making, with a particular focus on the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) and heuristics. Research focusing specifically on social workers' decision-making is

considered, and the chapter concludes with the research questions and the rationale behind them.

Chapter 5 presents the methodology used to explore the research aim and questions. Consideration is given to other research methods that were considered, before describing the semi-structured interview approach and how the data was collected, including the pilot study and ethical issues that arose. A description of how the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was conducted is given and challenges of this approach to analysis are presented.

Chapter 6 includes the findings of the research and highlights the themes identified through the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Pertinent extracts from the data are included, and links are made with relevant research.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, explores how the findings address the research questions, how the findings relate to the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), the methodological limitations of the research and implications for the practice of both social workers and educational psychologists within the Local Authority.

A more detailed summary of the research study can be found in the Public Domain Briefing contained in Appendix 10 of this volume.

CHAPTER 2: SHOULD SIBLINGS BE PLACED TOGETHER OR APART? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The relationships that we have with our siblings are considered to be one of the longest lasting and most significant of all our relationships (Conger, Stocker & McGuire, 2009), as our siblings outlive our grandparents, parents and other elder family members, and we spend more time with them than with our parents and our peers (Kramer & Conger, 2009). Our siblings can also be thought of as our first peer group, or friends, who teach us about social interactions and conflict management (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006; Conger et al., 2009), the mechanisms of prosocial and antisocial behaviour (Stormshak et al., 2009), problem-solving, play skills and negotiation (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010). Thus, it could be argued that they are also amongst the most important of all human relationships in terms of aiding our social development and our ability to deal with a variety of life experiences. For children who have been removed from their family home, and who have experienced the 'loss' of their parents, sibling relationships may be of even greater significance (Shlonsky et al., 2005a). Therefore, the decision of whether to keep siblings together or separate them should not be taken lightly and requires careful consideration. Such a decision could be seen as having equal importance with the decision to separate children from their parents (Lord & Borthwick, 2008).

The statutory guidance within the UK is that siblings should be placed together, unless this would not be in the best interests of one or more of the sibling group, or there is a good reason not to (Department for Education, 2012a). This view is also

taken in the United States of America, where it is recommended that siblings should always be placed together unless they have widely differing needs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006). If it is deemed necessary to separate siblings, guidance in the UK suggests that the reasons why should be clearly documented and reviewed, with judgments based on an assessment of the relationships and consideration of individual circumstances (DfE, 2012a; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004).

It is important to note that within my research, sibling placement in foster care and adoption are considered together, rather than separating the two areas, as most research in the literature focuses on both of these situations (Hegar, 2005). The two are often inextricably linked: when adoptive placements break down, siblings often return to foster care, and foster care placements sometimes become adoptive families.

In this chapter I aim to provide a brief overview of the research, taken from psychological and social work literature that has examined the issue of sibling placement in adoption and foster care, with a particular focus on the outcomes for those siblings placed together compared with those placed apart. This will be followed by a brief commentary on the limitations of this research to date. The following chapter will describe the legislation and guidance within the UK regarding the placement of siblings in foster care and adoption.

2.2 What does the literature say?

Herrick and Piccus (2005) estimated that over two thirds of children in care have siblings, but almost half of these are separated from at least one of their siblings. Having both spent time in care during their childhood, the authors take the view that the sibling relationship is important for these children, and that they should be placed together unless this will cause additional trauma or disruption (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Although this research represents only the two authors' personal views and experiences, and as such may be subject to bias, the general consensus seems to be that keeping siblings together seems to be 'the right thing to do' (p. 2, DfE, 2012a).

Over the past century, there has been a plethora of published research studies examining the sibling relationship. However, this research has tended to focus on siblings and sibling relationships within the general population. It was not until World War II that researchers turned their focus to siblings who had been separated from their parents and from each other (Hegar, 1988), through evacuation in the UK and the 'orphan trains' in the USA (Hegar, 2005). However, Conger et al. (2009) maintain that limited attention has been given to siblings in 'families facing adverse conditions' (p.46), including those separated either through adoption or movement to a foster care placement. Hegar (2005) also notes that there has been a recent growth in research in this area, but also that research into sibling placement remains 'under-emphasized and under-investigated' (p.720).

Within the body of research conducted to date that has focused specifically on this group of siblings, the findings have been inconclusive (DfE, 2012a). Some studies have noted better outcomes for siblings placed together (e.g. Herrick & Piccus, 2005); others noted better outcomes for those placed separately (e.g. Smith, 1998); others found no difference in outcomes when comparing those placed together with those placed apart (Hegar, 2005). For example, siblings placed together have been shown to experience greater placement stability, but those placed apart have also been associated with this when there is little or no relationship between the siblings (Hegar, 2005). Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) conducted a study in Australia and found that girls living with at least one sibling had better mental health compared to those separated, but there was no difference amongst boys. They proposed a number of possible causes for this gender-specific outcome, such as the protective experience of being with a sibling, whether girls with poor mental health were separated in the first place, or whether girls develop poor mental health as a result of separation. Thus, the findings are mixed and causal mechanisms of any outcomes are difficult to determine.

2.2.1 Why place siblings together?

From the research literature, benefits of placing siblings together in foster care or adoptive placements include fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties, improved socialisation, a stronger sense of identity and more stable placements (Conger et al., 2009). Wojciak et al. (2013) also suggests that positive sibling relationships can mediate the impact of trauma on internalising symptoms.

Hegar (2005), a leading name in the area of sibling placement in adoption and foster care, conducted a review of seventeen research studies conducted across the world that have focused on this particular issue. Although such an approach may be biased by the author's own view point and the potential for omission of articles that do not agree with this, a review provides a neat overview of the state of the current research. Hegar's (2005) review appears to be a rigorous and important piece of literature for my research study; it is the most up-to-date review available on the issue of sibling placement and it takes into account both adoption and foster care literature, which my study explores together. Hegar (2005) provides an explicit and detailed description of how she identified papers for inclusion in her review, and why she omitted certain papers from her initial search. This logical process led to a selection of seventeen research studies from across the world, that utilised transparent, rigorous and valid research methods; this results in a high quality review of the most recent literature concerning sibling placement.

Hegar (2005) notes that siblings can help children adapt to stressful situations and that siblings remain a source of support throughout life. This suggests that siblings placed together may be better able to cope with their situation, which may be stressful, and will have constant access to a network of support throughout their life, consistent with a resiliency perspective. Conger et al. (2009) also notes that the sibling bond may also act as a source of resiliency, especially into adulthood. Milevsky (2005) reports that sibling support in adulthood is linked with lower feelings of loneliness and depression, and higher self-esteem and feelings of life satisfaction. Milevsky (2005) suggests that for this reason the sibling relationship is important

source of support throughout life, and can compensate for low support from parents and peers.

Herrick and Piccus (2005) reported that separation from siblings may lead children to experience feelings of grief, worry and loss of identity. They highlight the importance of emotional support from siblings who have shared experiences and who may provide a sense of belonging.

Leathers (2005) conducted telephone interviews with caseworkers and foster carers of 197 adolescents in long-term foster care and followed their placement outcomes for five years. They concluded that siblings placed separately were at greater risk for placement breakdown due to a weak sense of integration and belonging, and that these children were less likely to be adopted than those placed together (Leathers, 2005). This study took a prospective and longitudinal approach to the area of interest, unlike a large proportion of similar studies which take a 'snapshot' and retrospective approach. However, it is worth noting that this study focused solely on the outcomes of adolescents who had been in foster care for a long time, and so the findings may not be generalisable to younger children in foster care, or those who had spent only a short time in care. Also, the outcomes were measured through discussion with the adults who were involved with these adolescents; their views were not considered. An examination of their views and experiences regarding their siblings may have highlighted other outcomes that were not presented in this study. Nevertheless, Leathers (2005) presents findings that highlight the potential benefits of keeping siblings together and the possible implications of separation.

Despite a number of studies indicating that placing siblings together increases placement stability and reduces the likelihood of placement disruption or breakdown (e.g. Hegar, 2005; Leathers, 2005), other research has questioned whether this actually indicates a positive outcome. For example, Barth et al. (2007) suggest that the reason sibling placements break down or disrupt when siblings are placed separately may be due to the children being moved to reunite them with their siblings. Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) studied administrative data in New York City, and found that separated siblings are sometimes brought together over time, and that more sibling groups are together at six months after coming into care than at the time of initial placement. Barth et al. (2007) also suggest that children may have been placed separately in the first instance due to disruptive or negative behaviours. Therefore, these children may be more likely to experience problems within their placement. As such, it is difficult to conclude that placement stability is actually a positive outcome caused by keeping siblings together.

Linares et al. (2007) found that placing siblings together acted as a protective factor for behavioural problems. However, this study focused only on children who had experienced neglect and abuse, and so is perhaps not representative of children in care as a whole. Similarly, they excluded children from their study if they entered care at different times, or if one or more of the sibling group had a disability.

2.2.2 Why separate siblings?

In practice, it is not always possible to keep siblings together for a variety of reasons. For example, children who have lived in families where there have been high levels

of violence have been found to be more aggressive towards their siblings (Conger et al., 2009). Sibling violence has also been linked with impaired psychological functioning and school disruptions (Linares, 2006). Leathers (2005) found that some siblings posed a risk to other siblings and had vastly differing needs. Therefore, in these situations, it may be difficult for a foster carer or adoptive parent to manage this aggression or meet the needs of these children, and they may benefit from being in separate placements.

Similarly, research has shown that children are more likely to be separated from their siblings if they enter care at different times, if they are opposite genders, if they are further apart in age, if one or more of the children have a disability, if birth parents have not relinquished responsibility for all of their children or the court has not removed all children, and if they come from large sibling groups, where it may be difficult to find placements willing to take more than two or three children (Drapeau et al., 2000; Hegar, 2005; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Singer, 2002). To give an example of this within the UK, the DfE (2012b) reported that there were eighty siblings groups of three children on the Adoption Register in that year, but only three potential adopters who were willing to consider adopting three children. In a longitudinal approach, Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) found that smaller sibling groups were more likely to be placed together, especially if entering care at the same time, and more likely to be placed with relatives.

Sometimes, it may be beneficial to place siblings apart. Herrick and Piccus (2005) note that not all sibling relationships are positive, and may be trauma-causing,

unhealthy and abusive. In these situations, children may achieve better outcomes if they are placed separately.

One potential risk with placing siblings together may occur if the elder sibling has been 'parenting' the younger sibling for a period of time before coming into care. If this so-called 'parentification' continues within the foster care or adoptive placement, the elder sibling may lose the opportunity to be a child and negative outcomes may result (Conger et al., 2009). However, this parentification can be a source of comfort and provide a sense of security during a turbulent time of a child's life, providing a consistent attachment figure during this period of transition. Shlonsky et al. (2005b) argue that such behaviours may be considered 'normal' in some cultures, and may actually be positive, indicating commitment between one sibling and another. Similarly, if the opportunity to 'parent' the younger sibling is removed, the elder sibling may experience feelings of loss and guilt, and lose their sense of identity. This suggests that in situations where one child has acted as a parent for the other child (or children), careful consideration of these factors is crucial to ensuring the best outcomes for all of the children.

Whelan (2003) also highlights the importance of the sibling relationship in terms of attachment theory. He suggests that siblings can contribute to a 'secure attachment environment' (p.21), but that if the relationship is abusive, it may detract from this and separation should be considered (Whelan, 2003).

Another risk with placing siblings together is that they may 'band together' (p.50, Conger et al., 2009) or have 'enmeshed relationships' (p.795, Leathers, 2005) and, as a result, may fail to become 'integrated into the foster family'.

In a few studies, negative outcomes of placing children together have been noted. For example, Hegar (2005) reviewed one study where being placed together resulted in lower scores on a test of receptive vocabulary, and one study where siblings placed together was associated with a higher likelihood of the placement being disrupted. Drapeau et al. (2000) also found that placing children separately can improve sibling relationships, as there is less rivalry and competition.

This review of the literature related to sibling placement in foster care and adoption highlights how complex the issue is. It is not clear from the research whether placing siblings together is associated with better outcomes than placing them apart. However, as Hegar (2005) tentatively concludes:

'... joint sibling placements are as stable or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings, and several studies suggest children do as well or better when placed with their brothers or sisters.' (p.731)

2.3 Limitations of the research

Despite providing useful information regarding the potential benefits of placing siblings together, reasons as to why siblings may be separated, and so on, the research to date has a number of limitations.

Hegar (2005) provides a neat overview of seventeen studies in the area of sibling placement. However, the child populations identified vary greatly between these studies. One key limitation that research in this area has faced is to how to define a sibling (Lery et al., 2005). For example, some studies have identified siblings as those who share both parents and could be considered 'full siblings', others have included half siblings, some have focused solely on those who entered care at the same time, or those who shared one parent and lived in the same household, and yet others focused solely on siblings who shared a mother (Hegar, 2005). This not only highlights the fact that in a world where the family composition is constantly changing it is hard to identify who actually constitutes a sibling, but also shows that the findings from one study regarding siblings may have focused on a quite different group of children than another.

Another limitation is that there seems to be no agreement as to what proportion of children in care have siblings. Estimates range from 59% (DfE, 2012a) to 75% (Herrick and Piccus, 2005). This could be related to how siblings are defined, but could also suggest a lack of data regarding siblings. Administrative data in particular, which a number of studies in this area appears to rely on, may not be reliable as it relies on the person collecting and recording the data to do so accurately, without missing anything, and also may lack validity as it is likely to have been gathered for a different purpose than that which it is used for in the research (Shlonsky et al., 2005). When children enter care at different times, it may be particularly challenging to keep accurate records (Lery et al., 2005), as it may be difficult to identify a child's siblings, especially when they may share only one parent and may have lived at a different

address. Similarly, this type of data does not provide any information regarding the quality of the sibling relationship, but only provides statistical information (Lery et al., 2005).

Lery et al. (2005) also note that a high number of studies in this area, including their own, only show outcomes from a retrospective viewpoint at one moment in time due to their cross-sectional design. Further studies taking a more longitudinal and prospective approach are needed to clarify the issues regarding sibling placement. An over-reliance on retrospective studies in this area means that some of the findings may lack reliability, as information may have been missed, forgotten or changed over time.

Often studies looking at sibling placement do not appear to take any baseline measure, due to their retrospective approach (Shlonsky et al., 2005). For example, they do not record whether the child had any behavioural difficulties before coming into care, but then conclude that their higher level of behavioural difficulties once in care are a result of being separated from their siblings. Thus, any research that takes this approach must be considered with caution.

Without baseline measures, it is difficult to determine whether the status of the sibling placement (i.e. together or apart) has led to the particular outcome being measured. Any negative outcomes may have been a result of the child's experiences before coming into care and before the sibling separation (Conger et al., 2009; Drapeau et al., 2000). There are also a number of different environmental factors that may

contribute to the outcome for siblings. For example, children who have been separated from their siblings may be living with foster carers who have a different approach towards their care. Similarly, due to a shared history, siblings are unlikely to be truly independent subjects (Shlonsky et al., 2005). Thus, it is difficult to conclude that separation has caused the outcome measured, as there are many other variables that could account for this which are often not controlled for.

Hegar (2005) also notes that in the seventeen studies she focused on, a variety of research methods (e.g. focus groups, interviews, questionnaires) and ways of measuring outcomes were employed. This may mean that results from one study may not be directly comparable to the results of another. However, Washington (2007) views this 'diversity of design and methodology' (p.426) as a strength of the research in this area, as she feels that it helps highlight the importance of keeping sibling groups intact from a range of perspectives.

A final limitation is that much of the research in this area has been conducted in the USA and Canada. There appears to be few research studies that have taken place within the UK. Research from other countries must be interpreted and generalised with caution, as there are likely to be some differences in their practice regarding foster care and adoption.

2.4 Summary and implications for practice

From the research literature outlined in this chapter, it is clear that the area of sibling placement in foster care and adoption is a complex one. Evidence tends to suggest

tentatively that placing siblings together generally results in better outcomes for the children. However, in families where there are high levels of sibling conflict or aggression, or in those where the children have experienced significant trauma or abuse, it may be better for siblings to be placed separately. It would seem that social workers faced with making decisions about sibling placement have a difficult task, where the individual circumstances of each child need to be considered.

CHAPTER 3: HOW DO SOCIAL WORKERS MAKE THESE DECISIONS? POLICY AND GUIDANCE IN RELATION TO THE PLACEMENT OF SIBLINGS IN ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I aim to provide an overview of the relevant policies within which social workers are required to make decisions regarding the placement of siblings in long-term foster care and for adoption. I will also illustrate the guidance and assessment tools that are available to these social workers to aid their decision-making. From this latter section, it will be demonstrated that there is little information available to aid their decision-making. For this reason, I would argue that social workers' decisions are often based upon their own personal or subjective judgments, and that they are likely to rely on heuristics and mental shortcuts when faced with making these decisions. Further detail regarding these processes is discussed in the next chapter.

3.2 Current policies and legislation

In England and Wales, the overarching legislation that applies to the placement of siblings in long-term foster care or for adoption is within the Children Act 1989 (HM Government, 1989). This Act places a duty on local authorities (LAs) to accommodate a child with his or her siblings so far as is 'reasonably practical and consistent with his/her welfare' (Section 23 (7) (b)). More recently, the Care Standards Act 2000 (HM Government, 2000) states that children should live with their siblings if this would meet their assessed needs. The Adoption and Children Act

2002 (HM Government, 2002) also highlights the importance of maintaining relationships with a child's birth family, including siblings.

In 2012, the Department for Education published a call for views specifically relating to the placement of siblings for adoption. They recognised that sometimes it is not within the best interest of the child to keep them with their siblings and that few adopters were willing to take on large sibling groups (DfE, 2012a). Related to this was the idea that children in sibling groups may take longer to place in permanent homes and the DfE (2012) felt that this was unfair. The purpose of this call for views was to determine the barriers that prevented siblings from being placed together, ways to encourage potential adopters to consider sibling groups, whether social work practice supported or inhibited placements of children with their siblings, and whether the legal framework should be amended to 'qualify the current underlying presumption in favour of placing siblings together' (p. 9, DfE, 2012a).

In 2013, the DfE (2013) published a summary of the responses to this call for views. It is important to note here that only 102 responses were received relating to sibling placement, the majority of which were adoptive parents, voluntary organisations and social workers. The responses indicated that a change to the legislation was not felt necessary as the amendments could be addressed through the broader adoption reforms that are planned for the future (DfE, 2013). However, 40% of respondents did not answer the question relating to whether the law should be more explicit regarding the placement of siblings. For those that did respond to this question, 36% felt that the law should be more specific, while only 23.5% indicated 'no' (DfE, 2013).

This seems to suggest that a number of key stakeholders in issues regarding sibling placement felt that the current legislation may not protect the rights of siblings and account for the individual needs of children within the sibling group.

In the 'Action plan for adoption', the DfE (2012b) put forward their proposals for 'tackling delay in the adoption system' (p. 3). Among their aims to reduce the length of time that the adoption processes take, as adoption is at its lowest point for a decade, the DfE (2012b) propose that more adopters should be recruited who are willing to adopt sibling groups. Thus, there is recognition within plans for future legislation and guidance of the significance of the sibling relationship.

3.3 Guidance and assessment tools available

An article from The Independent newspaper in May 2013 highlights the popular media's concern that the guidance stating that children should be placed with their siblings unless this would not be in their best interests is not being followed, and that 'thousands of children' are affected by the 'negative impact' of being placed apart from their siblings (Owen, 2013). Another article within the media suggests that the 'lack of guidance on keeping siblings in care together is disturbing and risks damaging relationships' (Henry, 2014). This latter article reflects the idea that there is 'no specific guidance' relating to the placement of siblings in care or adoptive placements and that simply 'acting in a child's best interests' does not state clearly enough the importance of considering all aspects of their life, including their sibling relationships (Henry, 2014).

As highlighted in the previous chapter, keeping siblings together is often seen as ‘the right thing to do’ (p. 2, DfE, 2012), but this may not always be in the best interests of the child. Research in the area of sibling placement is inconclusive with regards to whether placing sibling together or apart results in optimal outcomes (Hegar, 2005). This seems to be because of the vast range of variables that can impact upon outcomes for children and because every child is different. As the DfE (2012a) highlight, ‘professional judgment’ is key in this ‘difficult and sensitive’ area (p. 4). LAs are responsible for deciding whether to place siblings together or apart, and it is mainly social workers that lead the decision-making process (Saunders & Selwyn, 2010). The statutory guidance suggests that decisions regarding the placement of siblings must be based on assessment of relationships within the sibling group, individual needs and the capacity of prospective adopters to meet these needs (p. 5, DfE, 2012a).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) are an independent, non-departmental public body that aim to improve the standards of health and social care within England by developing evidence-based guidance and information for professionals working within this area (NICE, 2013). It is intended that professionals follow their published guidelines as part of their duty of care, but the guidelines are not legally binding, but could be thought of as ‘good practice’ (NICE, 2013). The NICE Guidelines (2010) relating to looked after children and young people suggest that:

‘...all decisions taken about sibling care, placement and contact...includes siblings who may be adopted, those who share one birth parent, and stepbrothers and stepsisters.’ (p. 32)

NICE (2010) then continue to say that siblings should always be placed together unless assessments and the wishes of the child or young person suggest otherwise. However, no clear information is given regarding what particular 'assessments' or methods of gaining a child or young person's wishes are recommended. It would seem that social workers are required to make their own judgment as to what, if any, assessment tools or methods to employ when faced with these decisions. The guidelines then make recommendations regarding recruiting foster carers who are specifically interested in caring for sibling groups, and for placement teams to help meet the housing and financial needs of those carers and provide additional support to ensure that siblings can be placed together (NICE, 2010).

The guidance provided by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (2004) is similarly vague as to how these decisions should be made. The SCIE is an independent charity whose aim is to improve the knowledge of skills of people working in care services, including social workers. They recognise that decisions regarding sibling placement is complex, and that children should be placed with their siblings, if possible (SCIE, 2004). SCIE (2004) state that judgments should be made with regards to individual circumstances, but again, no recommendations are made regarding how social workers should proceed when making these decisions and any assessments tools that may be helpful.

Despite the emphasis on the importance of 'assessment', there is no clear guidance or pathway which social workers should follow when making these potentially life-changing decisions. Within the LA in which I work, a recent OFSTED inspection

questioned how the social workers made these decisions and what particular assessments they based these decisions on. It became apparent that there was little consistency between social workers, and this was criticised. Within the literature related to sibling placement, this lack of clear guidance has also been noted.

Ottaway (2013) suggests that there is a lack of expertise amongst social workers regarding the significance of the sibling relationship and the lifelong consequences of their decisions to separate siblings or keep them together. She also notes that formal assessment of sibling groups is rare (Ottaway, 2013). In response to the government's call for views on placing sibling groups for adoption, she suggests that the government's priority should be to raise social workers' expertise in this area and develop practice guidance, as well as increasing the research and evidence base relating to siblings in foster care and adoptive placements (Ottaway, 2013). Other responses to this call for views focused on boosting social workers' skills and knowledge regarding sibling relationships and what is 'normal', the lack of a standardised assessment tool, the needs for clearer frameworks and guidance, and the limited training given to social workers, either in their social work degree or post-qualification training, relating to the complex area of sibling placement (DfE, 2013).

Ottaway (2013), a Lecturer in Social Work at Cardiff University, highlights the 'potential of formal assessments in assisting social workers with decision-making about sibling groups in adoption' (p. 5); this, in her mind, could include observing the children in sibling groups on more than one occasion, together and alone, establishing detailed case histories, and gathering the children's own views. Ottaway

(2013) also notes the potential usefulness of a resource by Lord and Borthwick (2008), which includes sibling relationship 'checklists' that could be used as an aid to decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. Ottaway (2013) notes that this resource should be used with caution, as it may only provide a 'snapshot' view of a sibling relationship, and suggests that social workers should be encouraged to 'adopt a life-span approach' to the assessment and that the needs of each child should be considered longitudinally (p. 12). It is also important to note here that, although Lord and Borthwick (2008) appears to be one of the only resources available for assisting social workers in their decision-making, there is no explanation of how the 'checklists' were developed, nor any comment on whether there is an evidence base that suggests the use of these checklists leads to either higher quality decisions or more positive outcomes for the siblings.

Lord and Borthwick (2008) recognise that 'taking decisions about separating or keeping groups of brothers and sisters together is probably one of the most challenging tasks facing child care social workers today' (back cover). This resource aims to provide social workers with a child-centred framework to aid their decision-making in this area. Lord and Borthwick (2008) provide a brief overview of the laws and policies surrounding siblings in care and of the research that has been carried out in this area. They recommend that 'there should be specific written policies and procedures in relation to working with and planning for sibling groups' (p. 9). In practice, however, it is unclear as to whether this is the case for the majority of LAs.

As well as highlighting the factors that might affect whether siblings are placed together or apart, covered in Chapter 2 of this volume, Lord and Borthwick (2008) also acknowledge that social workers and other professionals who may be tasked with making decisions regarding sibling placement may hold views and beliefs that influence their decision-making:

‘...many workers and others have strong views, often based in their own personal experience, about whether siblings should be kept together at all costs or should ever be separated. Some may find it impossible ever to contemplate siblings needing to be placed separately, while others may find it impossible to believe that any new family could parent a group of four or five siblings, all of whom are needy in their own right.’ (p. 9)

This quotation neatly explains how personal views and beliefs may affect a social workers decision-making, and also suggests that they are not totally rational beings, and so may rely on heuristics when making decisions. Lord and Borthwick (2008) go on to say that clear procedures and assessment tools may negate the potential bias that personal beliefs and values may cause. The steps that Lord & Borthwick (2008) feel should be followed to gain an in-depth understanding of a group of siblings and their relationships are highlighted below in Figure 1:

- Clarify who the siblings are.
- Identify and engage the key people involved with the children, often in ‘permanency planning meetings’, possibly including social workers, foster carers, representative from the adoption and permanence team, family centre staff member, a psychologist and birth parents.
- Allow regular contact between the siblings if they are currently placed separately, so that they can spend quality time together and their relationships can be assessed.
- A full assessment of each child independently should be completed.
- Gather the child’s views and feelings regarding their brothers and sisters, possibly including life story book work.

- Gain an understanding of the context in which the sibling relationship has developed, including shared history and family experiences.
- Assess each child's relationship with each of their siblings, before moving on to consider the overall dynamics of the group.
- Identify ways in which the sibling relationships could be improved, including therapy and life story work.
- Consider whether any of the following factors are present which may indicate that the siblings should be placed separately: intense rivalry and jealousy, exploitation, chronic scapegoating of one child, maintaining unhelpful hierarchical positions, highly sexualised behaviour with each other, and acting as triggers to each other's traumatic material and potentially constantly re-traumatising each other.
- The reasons for separating or keeping siblings together should be recorded and evidenced in the child's file.

Figure 1. Assessing whether siblings should be placed together or apart. Taken from: Lord & Borthwick (2008) (pp. 19-23).

Aside from Lord and Borthwick (2008), an extensive search of the literature revealed little guidance or practical advice for social workers faced with making the decision of whether to place siblings together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements. In particular, the only other detailed assessment tool that I found was developed by Maschmeier (2001) as part of a large scale project in conjunction with the Northeast Ohio Adoption Services in the USA. The aim of this project was to increase the number of siblings placed together and to improve the quality of sibling relationships (Maschmeier, 2001). The project was longitudinal in approach, starting in 1997 and continuing until 2001; the recommendations from the project included developing specialised foster care programmes for large sibling groups, the importance of assessing each child's relationships, strengths and needs, and training social workers and other staff regarding the importance of the sibling relationships (Maschmeier, 2001). Through this project, the Sibling Decision Making Matrix was

also developed; this Matrix has five steps, which social workers should consider when placing siblings, and is highlighted in Figure 2:

- Assess the past, current and potential relationships for all of the siblings, including duration, quality and intensity.
- Look at the safety risks of placing siblings together, including sexual abuse and aggression.
- Identify the possible long-term benefits of keeping siblings together compared with potential damage to the attachment relationship.
- Assess the foster family or adoptive family's ability and willingness to meet all of the children's needs.
- Gather the children's expectations and wishes regarding their placement.

Figure 2. Steps to consider when placing siblings. Taken from: Maschmeier (2001) (p. 56-63).

This Matrix draws attention to the importance of carefully examining the sibling relationship, as well as reflecting on the impact of either separating the siblings or keeping them together. Although this Matrix may be potentially useful for social workers when making this type of decision it does not appear to have been adopted more widely, beyond the project for which it was designed. Therefore, its utility beyond this project is unclear, and there appears to be no evidence to suggest that its use would aid social workers in their decision-making, or that its use results in any positive outcomes for the sibling groups involved.

3.4 Is policy reflected in practice?

Despite the widely cited view that siblings should be placed together, unless it would not be in their best interests, it is unclear whether this is reflected in practice. Recent estimates suggest that within the UK, approximately three quarters of children in care have been separated from their siblings at some point (DfE, 2012a). It is unclear as to why this is the case, but it could be related to a number of factors such as the lack of placements willing to take large sibling groups, inconclusive research evidence suggesting that placing together leads to better outcomes, the decisions made by social workers, and so on. Further research needs to be carried out in order to strengthen the guidance that is currently available for social workers who are making these decisions, and to ensure that the recommendations made in policy are based upon the evidence.

3.5 Summary

In conclusion, it would appear that the current legislation and policy within the UK recommends placing siblings together unless this would not be in the child's best interests. This preference for keeping siblings together is also prevalent outside the UK, for example, US law also recommends this. However, despite advice suggesting that social workers carry out an 'assessment' of each child and explore each sibling relationship, there appears to be little guidance or procedural frameworks to aid social workers in making these potentially life-changing decisions. It would seem that the decision-making of social workers may rely upon their own rather subjective views, which may be influenced by factors such as time pressure and the need to make a decision quickly, the impact of holding a large caseload, the emotional effects

of the job including stress, and the use of heuristics to aid decision-making under these pressures.

3.6 Decision-making within the present Local Authority

Of particular relevance to the present study are the context and the characteristics of social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings within the Local Authority (LA) in which the research was undertaken. Within this LA, decisions regarding the placement of siblings are usually made when children first enter the care system, where there is a change of placement, or where one child within the sibling group may be experiencing some type of difficulty. Figure 3 below highlights the typical process of how these decisions are made in this LA.

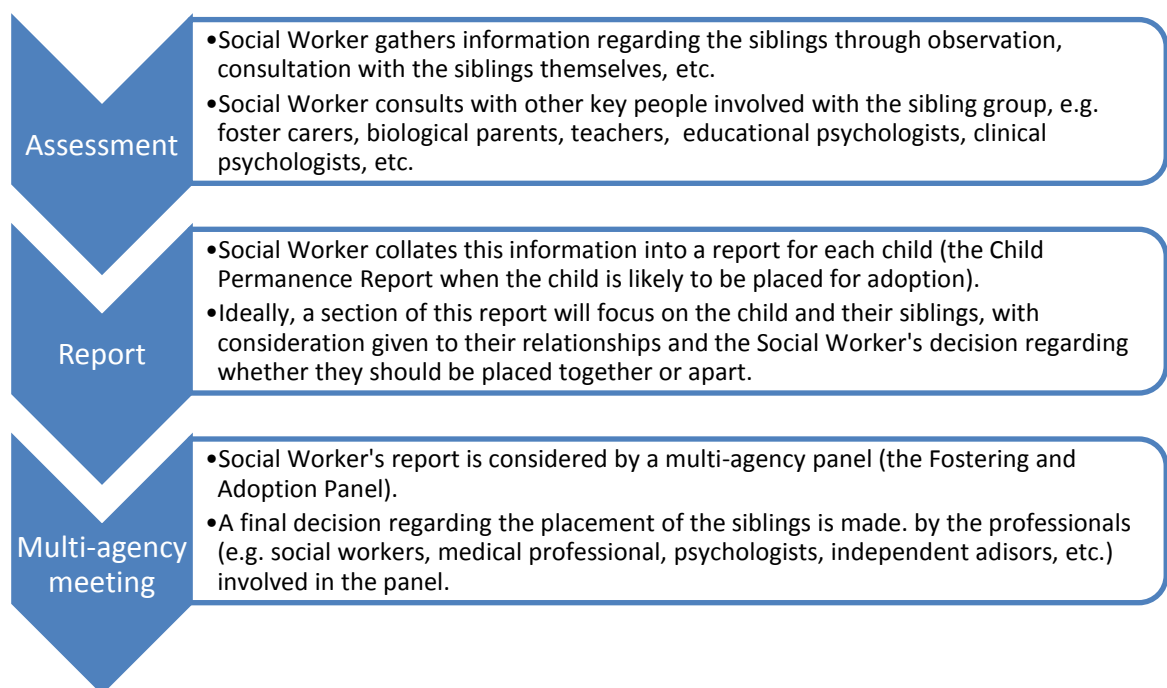


Figure 3. The typical process within this LA regarding the decision of whether to place siblings together or apart.

Figure 3 shows that the final decision regarding the placement of siblings is made by a multi-agency panel. However, the work leading to this point is generally carried out by one social worker, who may be supervised by a more senior social worker. Decision-making within groups, such as that which would take place in a multi-agency meeting, is characteristically different from individual decision-making. For example, research and the theory of 'groupthink' has shown that groups are more likely to make extreme or risky decisions than individuals, the group may make a decision based on the views of the group member with the highest authority or group members may wish to conform with the views of others (Hardman, 2009). However, within this research, I decided to focus on individual decision-making regarding the placement of siblings, as I felt that the social workers were likely to play a leading role in the final decision.

Research has shown that group discussions tend to focus on information that is already known (Hardman, 2009). Having consulted with a senior practitioner social worker within the LA regarding the multi-agency group process, it seemed that of all the professionals involved in the multi-agency meeting, the social workers generally tended to have the most detailed and up-to-date information regarding the sibling group and were likely to have had the most contact with the children, and therefore the most information. Other professionals within the multi-agency group, such as medical professionals, independent advisors or psychologists, may have had little to no contact with the children involved. Therefore, I would propose that an individual (the social worker) is likely to have made a decision regarding the placement of the sibling group before the multi-agency meeting has taken place, and that their decision is likely to guide the discussions and final decision-making of the group. As

such, it is the decision-making of the individual that is of interest within the present research. The following chapter provides detail on the psychological perspectives on individual decision-making.

CHAPTER 4: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DECISION-MAKING

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of psychological perspectives on individual decision-making. I begin by describing the historical context in which these perspectives began to emerge. I then outline the key approaches to decision-making, with a particular focus on the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), and a reflection on how social workers make decisions, particularly within the realm of sibling placement. This chapter concludes with comment on the relevance of the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) to the present research project, a brief commentary on social workers' decision-making, and how the literature review led to the development of my research questions.

Research into how people make decisions has been carried out for several decades across a range of disciplines, including psychology (Koehler & Harvey, 2004). Eilon (1969) noted that much of the early research into decision-making failed to provide a definition of what 'decision-making' actually is or what is meant by 'decision'. He suggests that a 'decision' is made when the decision-maker chooses from several alternatives, and that this choice is based on a comparison between these alternatives and an evaluation of their outcomes (Eilon, 1969). The key idea to take from this definition is that a decision requires some element of consideration, comparison, evaluation or other mental process.

Our day-to-day lives are filled with a series of decisions, from what to have for breakfast, whether it is safe to pull out in our car at the roundabout, when to arrange the meeting at work, and so on. All of these decisions are informed by our own judgment (Hardman, 2009). Research has focused on the 'rules' people follow when making decisions, as well as *how* people make decisions and the processes involved.

Whilst exploring social workers' decision-making when considering whether to place siblings together or apart, it may be useful to take a psychological perspective; there appears to be little research that has explored their decision making in this context using such a perspective. Such a perspective may offer new insights into this complex area of decision-making.

Decision-making is also an area of research that is relevant to Educational Psychology (EP) practice. Educational Psychologists (EPs) are regularly required to make decisions, often working with 'complex and ill-structured problems' (p. 69, Monsen & Frederickson, 2008). It is likely that social workers face similar situations, and therefore an analysis of their decision-making processes may highlight issues that are also of relevance to EPs. EPs may also be involved in supporting social workers with their decision-making (Saunders & Selwyn, 2010), and the present research project may highlight additional ways in which support could be offered.

4.2 Historical context

Svenson (1996) suggested that there have been four distinct stages of decision-making research since its origins in the 1950s. The first stage focused on the structure of decision-making and the 'rules', rather than the psychological processes behind it; the second stage focused on the limitations of the first stage, the idea of bounded rationality, and the information processing approach began to emerge (this is detailed later in this chapter); the third stage looked for evidence to support the psychology of decision making and the information processing approach; the fourth and final stage focused on how humans change their approaches to decision-making when they face decision conflicts (Svenson, 1996). It is within the second and third stages of this research that the present research project will focus.

4.3 Rationality vs. bounded rationality

Research into decision-making appears to have its origins in economics (Hardman, 2009) and mathematical models (Payne, 1976). Classical economists assumed that humans are rational beings and that we make rational decisions. However, in the 1950s, psychologists, such as Simon (1955) began to question this idea of 'rationality' as there appeared to be increasing evidence that humans often make fairly irrational decisions. Simon (1955) suggested that when faced with a decision, humans are affected by a range of contextual and personal constraints that influence their decision-making. From this, he proposed the idea of 'bounded rationality'; this suggests that the human brain has evolved a range of short-cuts or strategies that help us to make reasonable decisions when we are 'bounded' by these constraints (Simon, 1956). These short-cuts or strategies may be conscious or unconscious. As

Simon (1955) stated, 'we cannot, of course, rule out the possibility that the unconscious [meaning the unconscious processes, rather than in a psychodynamic sense] is a better decision-maker than the conscious' (p. 104). Conlisk (1996) argued that the idea of bounded rationality was preferable to the idea of the rational individual, as there is an abundance of empirical evidence from a range of disciplines to suggest that humans often make quite irrational decisions. One example of this from psychological research is the research that has looked at optical illusions, where individuals regularly make irrational choices or decisions (Hardman, 2009).

4.4 Dual process view of decision-making

From Simon (1955) and his idea of bounded rationality, research began to focus on a 'dual system' or 'dual process' view of thinking, involving unconscious processes on one hand, and conscious processes on the other (Hardman, 2009). For example, Bargh and Chartrand (1999) questioned the idea that humans are capable of 'consciously and systematically processing incoming information' (p. 462) in order to make a decision. They take the view that decisions are made via a combination of conscious and unconscious processes (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) and propose that humans are able to control the conscious processes, which require effort. Bargh and Chartrand (1999) highlight the two areas of research regarding the unconscious processes involved in decision-making: the first relates to skills being acquired and developing over time, allowing the individual to make a decision quickly and unconsciously; the second relates to unconscious encoding of environmental stimuli that then influences the decision made. The benefits of such a dual process theory are that the automatic, unconscious processes of thinking effectively 'free up' the

conscious thoughts of the individual and perhaps allow them to direct their attention to the most pertinent aspects of the decision to be made.

4.5 Normative vs. descriptive theories

A number of different theories of judgment and decision-making have been proposed since the 1950s. These theories can be divided into two categories: normative theories, which explore how we *should* make decisions, and descriptive theories, which explore how people actually make decisions (Over, 2004). Edwards and Fasolo (2001) suggested that the majority of decision research since the 1960s has focused on the latter set of theories. Within the present research project, it is these that are of particular interest, as the aim is to explore how social workers make decisions regarding the placement of siblings, rather than how they *should* or *ought* to make these decisions.

4.6 Information Processing Approach

Since the 1950s, when interest in how people make decisions began to grow, a huge amount of literature and research studies relating to this area have been published. Within this, a number of different approaches describing how humans make decisions have been proposed. One that has received a lot of attention is an approach that has focused upon how individuals process the information presented to them in relation to a particular decision Beach and Mitchell (1978) put forward a simple model of individual decision-making. This is illustrated in Figure 4 below:

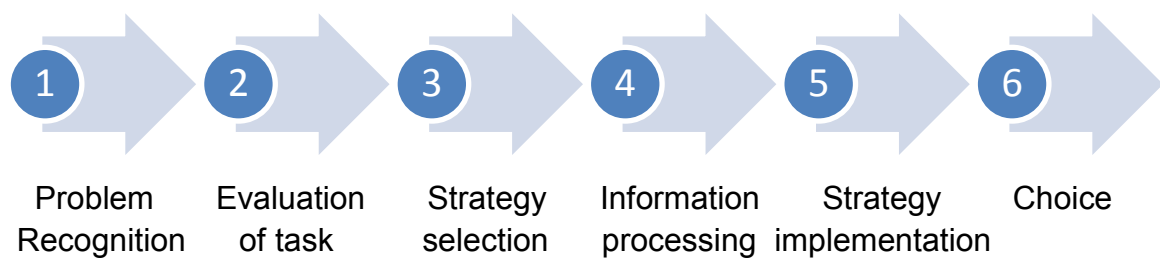


Figure 4. A typical model of individual decision-making (based on Beach & Mitchell, 1978).

Figure 4 shows neatly how decision-makers may arrive at different decisions based upon a number of factors, including their evaluation of the task (or decision) at hand, the strategies that they select to attempt the task, the information that they process (consciously and/or unconsciously) in relation to the task, and the strategy that they implement. Beach and Mitchell (1978) suggest that the personal characteristics of the decision-maker can also influence this process, including their knowledge, their ability to implement different strategies and their motivation.

The Information Processing Approach summarised by Payne and Bettman (2004) is a ‘theoretical and methodological framework’ (p. 110) for examining human decision-making. It is a descriptive theory, as it focuses on *how* decisions are made. This approach can trace its routes back to Simon (1955) and the idea of ‘bounded rationality’, in that it suggests that humans are ‘bounded’ by constraints in the environment and in the mind. The Information Processing Approach also recognises that individuals ‘construct’ choices and preferences related to a decision ‘on the spot’, rather than having well-defined strategies or thought processes that dictate their approach to decision-making (Bettman et al., 1998). This approach also suggests

that there are conscious (voluntary) and unconscious (involuntary) processes involved in decision-making (Payne & Bettman, 2004). This approach focuses mainly on the cognitive aspects of human decision-making, but also takes into account emotional and motivational aspects which may have an impact on the final decision. It also takes into account the environmental context, including the social or cultural aspects, such as the influence of others.

Constraints in the environment which may influence decision-making include factors such as time, emotional costs, and pressures of workload. Constraints in the mind or in cognitive abilities include factors such as limits of memory, processing capabilities, and lack of knowledge. The Information Processing Approach suggests that these constraints influence human decision-making; therefore, any research exploring how humans make decisions, using this approach, must examine these factors and their influence. This idea may date back to Slovic (1972) who was amongst the first to propose that 'man's limited memory, attention and reasoning capabilities lead him to apply simple strain-reducing cognitive strategies for processing information when making judgments and decisions' (p.1).

The Information Processing Approach suggests that, due to these constraints, we are highly selective about the pieces of information that we pay attention to (Payne & Bettman, 2004), as we cannot always process all of the information presented to us. Attention can be seen as a 'scarce resource' for decision makers (Simon, 1978). Payne and Bettman (2004) agree with the idea that there are two different types of attention: voluntary and involuntary. We direct our voluntary attention to the

information that we perceive as relevant to the task or decision at hand. However, we do not have control over our involuntary attention; this type of attention is captured by aspects of the environment that are unusual or novel (Payne & Bettman, 2004) and we may not even be aware that we have focused our attention on these and that our actions have been influenced by them.

Another central idea proposed by the Information Processing Approach is that, as humans are 'bounded' by constraints in the environment and the mind, our capacity to process information is limited (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Therefore, when faced with a complex decision, where there is a lot of information to process, we rely on heuristics, or simplification mechanisms to help us make a decision. These heuristics can be thought of as 'mental shortcuts' that allow us to make decisions when experiencing constraints such as limited time or memory for information; they also allow us to make decisions quickly, with limited effort (Payne & Bettman, 2004) and reduce the information processing demands of the situation to within our limited capacity (Payne, 1976). Payne and Bettman (2004) propose that individuals possess a variety of heuristic strategies which have been acquired either through experience or through formal training, where they are taught particular shortcuts for making decisions.

Research literature from a number of disciplines, including psychology, has focused on these heuristics and a huge number of different heuristics or mental shortcuts have been identified, possibly because research has shown that no single heuristic works well across all situations that require decision-making (Payne et al., 1988). It

would be impossible to list them all within this Volume. However, Table 1 illustrates a number of heuristics that are thought to be commonly used in human decision-making:

Heuristic	Description
Affect heuristic	Selecting an option based on the decision-maker's feelings. (Peters & Slovic, 1996)
Anchoring and adjustment heuristic	The decision-maker makes an estimate by using some starting value and then adjusting it to arrive at the final decision. (Payne et al., 1992; Keren & Teigen, 2004)
Availability heuristic	Selecting the option by the ease at which such an instance comes to mind. (Tversky & Kahnemann, 1973; Payne et al., 1992)
Commitment heuristic	The decision-maker selects the option that is most consistent with a prior commitment that they have made. (Maule & Hodgkinson, 2002)
Confidence heuristic	The decision-maker chooses an option based on the confidence with which this option is presented by an advisory individual. (Price & Stone, 2004)
Familiarity heuristic	The decision-maker chooses the option that matches with decisions they have made in the past. (McCammon, 2004)
Minimalist heuristic	Selecting an option at random. (Goldstein, 2009)
Priority heuristic	The decision-maker goes through the options and chooses the option that gives the maximum gain. (Brandstätter et al., 2006)
Recognition heuristic	Selecting the option that is most 'recognisable' the decision-maker. (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002)
Representativeness heuristic	Selecting the option that is most 'representative' of or most similar to the desired outcome. (Tversky & Kahnemann, 1983; Payne et al., 1992)
Satisficing heuristic	The decision-maker considers each option in turn until they reach an option that they deem 'satisfactory'. (Simon, 1955)
Simulation heuristic	Selecting the option that relates to an imagined or 'simulated' scenario that the decision-maker has thought through. (Dougherty et al., 1997)
Social proof heuristic	The decision-maker selects the option that other people are selecting. (McCammon, 2002)
Take-the-best heuristic	One-reason decision-making; selecting the most valid option (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999), but if that does not help them decide between the options, moving on to the next most valid option, and so on. (Bröder, 2003; Newell & Shanks, 2003)

Take-the-last heuristic	Selecting the option that worked the last time the decision-maker was faced with that decision. (Gigerenzer et al., 1999)
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Table 1. Examples of heuristics

Payne and Bettman (2004) suggest that people use heuristics when there is no other option due to limited time or cognitive capacity to make the decision, when there would be a cost in terms of time and effort if the individual made the decision without using some sort of shortcut, or when a particular heuristic has worked in the past, resulting in a satisfactory outcome, and is readily available in the person's memory.

The idea that individuals rely on heuristics when making decisions is in direct contrast to the view that people make decisions based solely on logic, probability and other mathematical or economic concepts. Thus, the Information Processing Approach to decision-making has 'common sense' appeal and seems more relevant to how people *actually* make decisions.

An important aspect to the use of heuristics to aid decision-making is that 'people hardly ever make conscious decisions about which heuristic to use' (p. 77, Gigerenzer, 2004). Heuristic use tends to be an automatic process (Gigerenzer et al., 1999) and allows the individual to arrive at a decision swiftly and with relative ease. Payne et al. (1992) suggested that the more complex the decision, the more people will rely on a simplifying heuristic. This seems common sense within the Information Processing Approach, as complex decisions would require a high level of effort and mental capacity to process and analyse all of the relevant information. By

using a heuristic to aid decision-making, the processing demands are reduced, allowing the individual to come to a decision fairly efficiently.

This raises the question of whether the use of heuristics results in high quality decisions and positive outcomes. It could be argued that the use of heuristics leads to important information being missed or only briefly considered (Payne et al., 1992). However, research evidence is beginning to emerge that the use of heuristics is well-suited to making complex decisions (Hardman, 2009). In a series of five experimental studies, Dijksterhuis (2004) presented participants with a complex decision problem relating to choosing apartments or roommates. They found that participants who used heuristics made better decisions than those who relied on complex, conscious analysis (Dijksterhuis, 2004). These studies took part in an unnatural setting, perhaps reducing their generalisability beyond this context. However, the decisions that the participants faced reflected decisions that they might face in 'real life' and so would indicate that the use of heuristics in real life decision-making does not necessarily lead to bad decisions. Payne and Bettman (2004) also noted that heuristic use led to the production of good, or at the very least, satisfactory solutions.

The Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) is only one of many theories of human decision-making. It has been criticised for being overly simple and reductionist, reducing the complex workings of the human brain to that of a computer (Hardman, 2009). Similarly, much of the evidence reported by the authors that supports this approach appears to be taken from experimental studies conducted

within laboratory settings (Payne & Bettman, 2004), and so may lack ecological validity; there appears to be little research conducted to date that has sought to apply the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) within 'real life' settings where 'real' decisions are being made. It could also be argued that this approach focuses mainly on attention and processing functions during the decision-making process. However, other cognitive functions, such as memory, are not accounted for within this theory (Hardman, 2009); it is likely that there are many, complex cognitive functions that play a part in human decision-making, but the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) may not take these into account. Nevertheless, this approach seems most relevant to the type of decision-making which I wish to explore within the present research study. This is because of the theory's focus not only on the internal or cognitive processes involved in decision-making, but also the fact that it takes into account the external or environmental factors which influence decision-making, and the consideration of the impact of emotions.

When considering the emotional impact of decision-making, Luce et al. (2000) propose that having to make unfavourable decisions, where it is difficult to decide which option will lead to the best outcome, generates negative emotion. This leads to the decision-maker engaging in 'emotion-focused coping behaviour' (p.274). Within the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), this suggests that emotions can act as a constraining factor on human decision-making, whereby humans strive to avoid experiencing negative emotion by making a decision based on how it makes them feel. This may mean that a decision is based on the decision

maker's emotions. With regard to sibling placement, this could mean that a social worker decides to place siblings together because to do otherwise would lead to them experiencing negative emotions, such as sadness or guilt as to whether they have made the correct decision.

In conclusion, the Information Processing Approach appears to provide a good framework that aids our understanding of human decision-making. It seems particularly relevant to the types of decision that I wish to explore further (i.e. the decision-making of social workers regarding sibling placement), as when people are required to make complex decisions such as these, it is likely that their attentional processing capacity will be limited due the vast amount of information available to them, coupled with the likelihood that there will be constraints in their environment, such as time pressures, paperwork and high caseloads. In these situations, I propose that it is likely that social workers will rely on heuristics to some extent to aid their decision-making. It is also suggested that this approach is particularly relevant in decision-making when there is no clear best option (Beresford & Sloper, 2008), and as Chapter 3 of this volume will highlight, this is often the case with regards to decisions about the placement of siblings.

4.7 Social workers' decision-making

The majority of professionals working with children and young people are required to make difficult decisions on a regular basis. For teachers and head teachers, this could be whether to exclude a child after an episode of challenging behaviour. For EPs, this could be related to the best educational placement for a child with special

educational needs (SEN). For social workers, this could be whether to remove a child from their family home and take them into public care. The social worker's decision could also be the potentially life-changing choice of whether to separate a child from their siblings or keep them together in care. This decision may need to be made if the siblings have come into care at the same time, if there are a large number of children within the sibling group and it is difficult to find a placement or placements for them, or if one sibling is facing more difficulties within their current placement than the others.

Howe et al. (2000) suggest that social workers 'routinely make decisions which crucially affect their clients' lives' (p. 143) and describe social workers' decision-making as a 'difficult and taxing process' (p.143). They suggest that social workers are good at using checklists and manuals, but question how they then make sense of the information that they have gathered (Howe et al., 2000); Washington (2007) also suggests that the incorporation of theory into social work practice is minimal. Helm (2011) states that the quality of social work assessments has improved in recent years, but that the quality of analysis and judgment within these assessments is still limited. This has relevance to the present research study, as it suggests that further analyses of how social workers make these life-changing decisions is needed. Herrick and Piccus (2005) emphasise the importance of 'unbiased assessments' of sibling relationships, but also note that it is 'difficult to measure complex human emotions with scientific tools' (p. 855). Therefore, it could be argued that the subjective opinions and decisions of the social worker may provide a more useful insight into sibling relationships than a series of checklists and forms.

In relation to the placement of siblings, in an international review of the research literature, Hegar (2005) suggests that decisions regarding the placement of siblings 'may be based on agency policy, supervisory directives, and recommendations of interdisciplinary teams, as well as on available resources including time, homes, and funds' (p. 730). Hegar (2005) then goes on to state that case-by-case decision-making is the norm, due to a recognition that no two sibling groups are the same, and that a multidisciplinary approach is preferable to one individual making the decision in isolation. However, in practice, although a social worker will often gather the views of other professionals', the decision is often finalised by the social worker and their managers (Hegar, 2005).

Lord and Borthwick (2008) highlight how this decision is generally made within the UK: the social worker(s) should make an assessment of the sibling relationships within the family, as well as the parent-child relationship, and decide whether any work could be undertaken to strengthen these relationships. A care plan is then written regarding how each child within the family will be cared for (i.e. at home, being 'looked after' in care, a temporary or permanent arrangement). This care plan should also outline why the children have been separated or placed together. Foster carers may also be involved in this process, as they can offer an opinion based on their first-hand experience of living with one or more of the children regarding the placement of them and their siblings. Lord and Borthwick (2008) also state that the views of 'therapists or other specialists' (p. 16) who are working with the children should be sought. This could include an EP or clinical psychologist, or the children's guardian. All of the information gathered through this assessment should be

discussed at a 'permanency planning meeting', where the needs of the children within the sibling group would be considered, and decisions would be made regarding their placement. A reviewing officer may also be involved in order to gain an independent view on whether the siblings should be placed together or apart (Lord & Borthwick, 2008). If a child is being placed for adoption, the adoption panel may also make recommendations regarding whether to keep siblings together or separate them (Lord & Borthwick, 2008).

Lord and Borthwick's (2008) guidance for decision-making regarding the placement of siblings does not make any explicit reference to psychological theories of decision-making or heuristics. However, by advising social workers to consider the views of other people who are familiar with the siblings, they may be alluding to the social proof heuristic (McCammon, 2002). Similarly, the checklist devised by Lord and Borthwick (2008) to aid decision-making in this area may guide social workers towards using the priority heuristic (choosing the option that gives maximum gain, Brandstätter et al., 2006). Therefore, if social workers rely on this particular tool to aid them in their decision-making, they may be guided towards using particular heuristics or making decisions in a particular way.

Saunders and Selwyn (2010) also highlight that it is the Local Authority's responsibility to make decisions regarding the placement of siblings, and this often falls to social workers, who may not always have relevant experience or training in assessing sibling relationships and attachments. This suggests that social workers may require additional training or support when faced with these emotionally-charged

decisions, and raises the question of whether they are the right professionals to make these decisions independently.

Hindle (2000) emphasises the importance of gaining the child's views as part of the decision-making process. She questions the underlying assumption that siblings should be kept together and recommends that further exploration of how these decisions are made could lead to a more robust and evidence-based approach.

Randall et al. (2000) utilised an 'Action Learning Set' method to gather information regarding the barriers that social workers felt they faced in their day-to-day practice. This study highlighted the high number of barriers faced by social workers, which may hinder their ability to make the complex decisions that they are often required to make. Barriers identified included those in the organisational environment, such as unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy, worry about the validity of the measurement tools that they are required to use, a theme of blame and a sense of vulnerability following child care scandals in the press, and a preoccupation with the work that cannot get done due to high caseloads (Randall et al., 2000). It is important, therefore, to recognise the pressures that social workers may feel they are working under and the impact that this may have on their decision-making ability.

Taylor and White (2001) argue that social work practice is reliant on judgments and decision-making on a daily basis, and as such is 'an essential area for exploration', particularly due to the moral and ethical complexity of the decisions they face. An exploration of this area from a psychological perspective may offer a unique insight

into this area and help us understand how decisions are made under 'respectful uncertainty' (Taylor & White, 2006).

4.8 Concluding synthesis and research questions

As shown in Chapter 1, the decision of whether to place siblings together or apart in adoptive or foster care placements is a complex one, with no clear best option. This factor, accompanied by the lack of strict guidelines or policies relating to social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings, suggests that these decisions are likely to be made by individuals who may be subject to the influence of heuristics and other biases. Similarly, all humans may be influenced by the amount of information that they can process and thus pay attention to (Payne & Bettman, 2004).

The lack of guidance relating to this area, along with the lack of research specifically focusing on this area, led to the development of the present study. My research questions based on the existing literature and the rationale behind each question is highlighted in Table 2.

Research question	Rationale
What key pieces of information do social workers attend to deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoptive or foster care placements?	According to the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), attention is a scarce resource. As a result of this, humans are selective about what information they pay attention to. The research into the placement of siblings outlined in Chapter 2 of this volume suggests that there are many pieces of information that could be considered when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart. It is also likely that the tools and assessments that social workers utilise when faced with making these decisions will have an impact on the information that they attend to when considering the placement of siblings.
What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?	The Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) suggests that humans decision-making is constrained by a number of environmental factors and limitations of the mind. Social workers make decisions on a daily basis (Taylor & White, 2001) and are likely to face a number of constraints which will impact upon their decision-making (Randall et al., 2000).
Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?	Payne and Bettman (2004) suggest that decision-making is affected by social and cultural factors, including the influence of other people.
What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?	Social workers often have to make complex decisions quickly and efficiently (Hegar, 2005), and it is under these circumstances that humans may rely on heuristics to aid their decision-making.

Table 2. Research questions and their rationale.

The research described in Chapters 2-4 of this volume provides the basis on which the present study is grounded. The following chapter outlines the methodology used to answer the research questions identified above.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, I will outline the aims of the present research project and the specific research questions which I hope to answer. Following this, my ontological and epistemological stance is outlined, before moving on to a description of my research design and the reasons for choosing semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. I then discuss how the interview schedule was developed, and improved following a pilot study. Further explanation is provided regarding the recruitment of participants, my sample, the interview procedure and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a detailed explanation of my approach to data analysis.

5.2 Research aim and research questions

The overarching aim of the research project was to explore the decision-making of social workers within one Local Authority (LA) regarding whether to keep siblings together or separate them in foster care and adoptive placements, using the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) as a framework. In order to investigate this aim, the following specific research questions were developed:

5. What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?
6. What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?
7. Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?
8. What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

These research questions were generated from the literature review, presented in Chapters 2-4 of this volume. See the previous chapter for the rationale behind each of these research questions.

In order to investigate these research questions, the methodology that would assist with this needed consideration, along with the ontological and epistemological stance that influenced the approach taken.

5.3 Ontological and epistemological stance

5.3.1 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with what knowledge exists and how it exists (Goodley & Smailes, 2011). Bhaskar (1998) suggests that reality is stratified and that there are three different domains of the world: the real, the actual and the empirical. The real is what exists, whether we experience it or not; the actual domain refers to what happens when the mechanisms of the real are activated; the empirical domain is only what we experience (Bergin, Wells and Owen, 2008). The aim of the present study was to explore the mechanisms (such as the environmental factors and heuristics) which shaped the social workers' decision-making.

5.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how we know what exists (Goodley & Smailes, 2011). Scott and Usher (1996) state that epistemology is related to ontology as "claims about what exists in the world imply claims about how what exists may be known" (p.11). My epistemological stance is that of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998).

Bryman (2008) defines critical realism as ‘a realist epistemology that asserts that the study of the social world should be concerned with the identification of the structures that generate that world’ (p. 692). Critical realists propose that under certain conditions, mechanisms can be triggered which lead to how we experience the world.

5.3.3 Critical realism

A critical realism approach is relevant to the work of an Educational Psychologist (EP); Matthews (2003) suggests that this is because they ‘need to take a realist view of the world, to work in a social context, and to implement interventions in ‘open systems’ such as schools and homes’ (p. 60). Within the present study, a critical realist view appears to integrate well with the research purpose and aims; such a view allows the researcher to take into account the social context and the open system in which the research is being carried out (i.e. the LA in which the social workers are employed). I am interested in exploring what factors influence the social workers decision-making within one particular context; this relates to the realist perspective, which is interested with what works for some people in some contexts or what ‘mechanisms’ act in particular contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Such an approach explores the ‘underlying mechanisms that cause events to happen rather than the events themselves’ (p. 63, Matthews, 2003). This means that an appropriate research design would explore these mechanisms, rather than focusing solely on the events themselves. Within the present research study, this would mean that instead of focusing on *what* decisions social workers made regarding the placement of siblings, the focus would be on *how* they made these decisions and

exploring what factors influenced them. Thus, a qualitative approach or research design seemed preferable to a more restrictive quantitative approach.

A qualitative approach allows the researcher to 'directly hear the voices of the participants' (p. 12, Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) which is an important requirement of the present study. A qualitative design also allows the researcher to acknowledge their active role in the research process, such as through their own biases and interpretations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and their role within the social context of the research (Thomas, 2011). These concepts will be relevant within the present research study, as my interpretations and biases may influence the research and due to my role as a Trainee EP working within the same social context as the social workers and their decision-making, which I wish to explore. It is important to acknowledge the potential challenges of qualitative research, such as the risk of the researcher's own biases influencing the research (this will be explored later in this Chapter), and the risk that the findings will be embedded solely within one context (Thomas, 2009). As I am interested in exploring social workers' decision-making *within one LA*, this latter risk is of less concern.

Another issue that has received a lot of attention within research methods literature is the concern with determining the quality of qualitative research. Mays and Pope (2000) suggest that the researcher should address issues of reflexivity ('how the researcher and research process have shaped the collected data', p. 51) and relevance (when research 'either adds to knowledge or increases the confidence with which existing knowledge is regarded', p. 52) in order to ensure high quality

qualitative research. Reflexivity will be discussed later in this chapter, and the findings will have relevance as they will add to the body of knowledge that exists regarding social workers' decision-making, the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) and the use of heuristics within one particular context.

5.4 Research design

In order to design my research, I took into account the aim or purpose of the research, the research questions, my epistemological stance, ethical considerations and the literature included in Chapters 2-4 of this volume. This was in line with the components of research design identified by Robson (2002).

As I wished to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of social workers' decision-making within the context of one Local Authority (LA), a case study design seemed appropriate (Thomas, 2011). Bryman (2008) states that case studies focus on the 'complexity and particular nature of the case in question' (p. 52); this seemed an appropriate design for this study. Thomas (2011) suggests that a case study consists of two parts: a subject and the analytical frame or object through which you explore the subject. Within the present research study, the subject is the LA and the analytical framework (or object) is the social workers' decision-making.

Within the literature that focuses on case study design, there is some debate over whether issues such as reliability, replicability and validity are relevant and appropriate for this type of design (Bryman, 2008). Within the confines of the context of the LA, it is hoped that the research will provide rich qualitative data that will have

relevance to the social workers and other professionals, such as EPs, working within that context. However, it would be hoped that the findings would have some reliability, validity and generalisability within similar contexts.

Thomas (2011) describes a range of different kinds of case studies. The present study could be considered as a 'local case', as it relates to one particular case (the LA) within which I have 'special knowledge' or experience (p.88, Thomas, 2011) due to my position within that case. The present research study can also be thought of as an exploratory or descriptive case study (Thomas, 2011), as its purpose is to explore the social workers' decision-making within this LA and offer a detailed description of this.

As my research questions are exploratory, the case study can be thought of as exploratory (Thomas, 2011); as I work within the LA, I had some preliminary knowledge of the context and was familiar with the basic processes involved in social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings, which would hopefully increase the chance that I would ask valid questions. The first three research questions focus on 'drawing a picture' to explain a phenomenon (p. 118, Thomas, 2011) and exploring social workers' decision-making, whereas the fourth research question involves 'testing a theory within an exploratory framework' (the use of heuristics within the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004)) (p. 115, Thomas, 2011).

As I wished to explore social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings in adoptive and foster care placements, it was necessary to collect data from social workers within the context of the LA. In this way, the case study design can be thought of as a series of 'nested units' (the social workers) within one wider case (the LA) (Thomas, 2011).

5.5 Context

As highlighted in the previous section, the context in which the research was conducted is an important feature of the case study design. Table 3 below highlights some key characteristics of the Local Authority (no references are given for this data to protect anonymity).

Approximate population	252,000
Approximate number of households	102,000
Unemployment rate	5.7% of those aged 16-64 (Above national average of 2.3%)
Median annual pay of full-time employed residents	£23,908 (Below national level of £27,375)
% of children living in poverty	31.5% (Above national figure of 20.6%)
Number of Looked After Children (approximate)	710
Number of social workers in children's services (approximate)	150
Average caseload of each social worker (approximate)	30 cases (Above national average of 25)
Approximate vacancy rate for social care	10%
Approximate turnover of staff each year	10%

Table 3. Key characteristics of the LA in which the research was carried out.

This table highlights some of the potential challenges that social workers within this LA may face, such as high caseloads and relatively high turnover of staff. Within this LA there are also high unemployment and poverty rates, along with an increasing number of Looked After Children; these factors may place extra strain on social care departments which already appear to be understaffed.

It is important to note here that there is no information available regarding how many siblings are placed in adoptive or foster care placements and whether they are placed together or apart. I enquired about this information, but no data was available as this is not something that is routinely recorded. It also appeared that there was little consensus regarding how siblings are defined within the LA, as there was variation between social workers and individual cases as to whether the term 'siblings' involved full siblings, half-siblings and/or step-siblings.

5.6 Data collection methods considered

As mentioned previously, one of the benefits of adopting a case study design is that a range of data collection methods can be used. This section describes the range of different methods that were considered for the present research study. Several different methods of data collection were considered: observations of multi-agency meetings, studying social workers' reports, questionnaires, focus groups and interviews.

5.6.1 Observing multi-agency meetings

One of the first methods of data collection which I considered was observing multi-agency meetings, such as the Fostering Panel or Adoption Panel, where decisions regarding the placement of siblings were made. One advantage of using such an observational method of data collection is that it would provide the opportunity to see decisions being made in 'real life' instead of relying on self-report of the decision-making process. However, there are also several disadvantages of this method: there may have been an 'observer effect' in which the individuals being observed behaved differently as a direct result of being observed, or an 'observer bias' where the observer's perceptions and recordings may have been biased, resulting in unreliable data that may lack validity (Bryman, 2008).

The practicality of attending these meetings also needed to be considered. Upon enquiry, I discovered that I would be unable to attend these meetings due to the rules around confidentiality and the sensitive nature of the discussions that took place during these meetings. As my job role (as a Trainee Educational Psychologist) would not normally entitle me to attend such meetings, I was told that this would not be possible. Therefore, this method of data collection was necessarily dismissed at an early stage of the research project.

5.6.2 Studying social workers' reports

Another method of data collection that was considered involved studying the reports written by social workers as part of the process of deciding whether to place siblings together or apart and looking at evidence of their decision-making. This approach would have had several advantages: it would have provided the opportunity to examine real life examples of decisions and would have removed the potential for bias in the reporting of how these decisions were made. However, issues around confidentiality and the practicalities of gaining access to these reports meant that this was not a viable method of data collection within the context of the present study. Similarly, an informal discussion with a Senior Practitioner Social Worker within the Local Authority who had examined some of these reports revealed that there was limited evidence of how the social workers had arrived at a particular decision regarding the placement of siblings. Therefore, this method of data collection was also dismissed.

5.6.3 Questionnaires

I considered developing a questionnaire in order to answer my research questions. Questionnaires have many advantages: they allow for data to be collected quickly and economically and can be anonymous (Bryman, 2008). Questionnaires can also remove the impact of social desirability bias, as the respondent would complete the questionnaire independently. However, I decided not to use a questionnaire as my method of data collection, as I was concerned that the social workers may not feel motivated to give full and detailed responses to the questions, and also might not readily call to mind the information required (Bryman, 2008). Such an approach also

does not allow for follow-up questions to be asked, or questions asking for clarification. Thus, I felt that a questionnaire would result in incomplete data, or data that did not provide enough information to enable me to answer my research questions.

5.6.4 Focus groups

Bryman (2008) defines a focus group as 'a method of interviewing that involves more than one, usually at least four, participants' (p. 473). This could have been a useful method of data collection, allowing for exploration and discussion of the issues relating to sibling placement. However, I was concerned that there may have been social desirability bias, where the social workers provided the responses that they felt others within the focus group wanted to hear, and also due to the presence of myself as a facilitator, as well as ethical risks around lack of anonymity and confidentiality (Robson, 2002). I also felt that the data collected from a focus group may have reflected group decision-making, rather than the individual decision-making which I wanted to explore. Therefore, this method of data collection was also dismissed as inappropriate.

5.6.5 Interviews

Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods of qualitative data collection in research (Robson, 2002). Runswick-Cole (2011) claims that 'interviews are everywhere' (p. 88) and that qualitative research interviews appear natural and familiar, as they are similar in form to everyday conversations and allow people to present their views and opinions in their own words.

One of the key advantages of this method is that it can allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or ask for further clarification of an answer, which other methods, such as questionnaires, cannot. Such an approach also allows for flexibility and the opportunity to adjust questions and change the direction of the interview, provided that a semi-structured approach to interviewing is adopted, rather than a more rigid, structured approach (Bryman, 2008). Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to set the agenda of the discussion and gather the participant's views and opinions on the particular area that is the focus of the research (Scott, 1996).

One disadvantage of using interviews as a method of data collection is that they can be time-consuming. As a result, by selecting this method I had to consider this and be realistic about the sample size. As I wished to explore individual decision-making processes in-depth, and not provide strictly representative and generalisable findings, this was not a significant concern. Similarly, I was not overly concerned about the impact of social desirability bias in the context of the interview, as this can be overcome by providing an open and honest forum for discussion and not appearing judgmental about their responses (Bryman, 2008).

Interviews appeared to be the most suitable method of data collection for the present study. Details of the development of the semi-structured interview schedule, the pilot study and method of data analysis are presented in the next section.

5.7 Data collection

As noted in the previous section, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for data collection, as it was hoped that these would provide detailed information regarding the individual decision-making of the social workers interviewed. Qualitative research interviews are an appropriate method when the research is exploratory and when the researcher is interested in the individual accounts of a particular phenomenon (Robson, 2002), both of which are the case in the present research study.

Interviewing as a data collection method fits in well with my epistemology. This approach relates to Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) and the metaphor of the interviewer as a miner, uncovering hidden knowledge to understand the participant's experiences and the meanings that they place on these. When using interviews as a data collection method, two epistemological assumptions must be made: that the participants' responses reflect their actual behaviour, and that the data collected adds to our understanding of social behaviour and actions (Scott, 1996).

I decided to use open-ended questions within my semi-structured interview schedule, due to the benefits that this type of question have. For example, it would allow me to ask the participant follow-up questions or explore ideas further. Open-ended questions allow the participant to talk more freely than closed questions (Bryman, 2008); this may aid rapport building between myself and the participant, which may lead to more open and honest answers. Such an approach to interviewing also

allows for answers that may not be predicted by the research literature and allows for clearing up any misunderstandings (Robson, 2002).

5.7.1 Design of interview schedule

The interview schedule followed the sequence (p. 277) suggested by Robson (2002): it started with me introducing myself and explaining the purpose of the interview (both in writing on the Participant Information Sheet – see Appendix 1 – and verbally), a ‘warm-up’ or non-threatening question (that required a yes or no response), the main body of the interview, a ‘cool-off’ question where participants were asked if they wished to add anything further, and ‘closure’ where they were thanked for their participation.

The interview schedule opened with an introductory question, asking the social worker to confirm that they had been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. This was included as if they had not been directly involved in this type of decision-making within a real life context, they may have found it difficult to reflect on these experiences during the interview.

As the use of heuristics may be an unconscious process of which the individual is unaware, it may not be possible to gain a view of whether a particular individual uses heuristics by simply asking them. Therefore, Payne and Bettman (2004) proposed the use of what they termed a ‘verbal protocol analysis’ when investigating the use of heuristics in decision-making. This involves asking individuals to ‘think aloud’ whilst performing some sort of decision-making task. By asking participants to ‘think aloud’, it is thought that their descriptions can provide information regarding their cognitive

operations and decision strategies (Rieskamp & Hoffrage, 2001). This approach can provide rich qualitative data about how people respond to situations (Robson, 2002). As I could not observe social workers making decisions regarding sibling placement in a real life context, I decided to utilise two vignettes within my interview schedule.

The use of vignettes involves presenting the participant with one or more scenarios and asking them how they would respond if they were confronted with the situations described in the scenarios (Bryman, 2008). The advantage of using this type of method is that it does not limit the participants to a particular response and encourages reflection on their answer. However, one disadvantage is that the participant may feel that they are being judged by their responses (Bryman, 2008). However, as the vignettes used in the present study involved fictional people and situations, it would be hoped that this would provide 'distance' between the participant and the scenario, and thus be less threatening.

In order to provide valid responses, it is vital that the vignettes are believable (Robson, 2002). For this reason, the vignettes used in the present study were based on the format used in a section of an anonymised report written by a social worker within my LA, where a sibling relationship was described. I developed two vignettes (see Appendix 2), that were to my knowledge entirely fictional and not based on any children in particular. The first vignette describes two siblings (an older girl and a younger boy) whose relationship could be considered to be negative – their relationship is described as 'challenging', there is little evidence of sharing, they are mutually critical of each other and the sister says she 'hates her brother'.

The second vignette could be considered to describe a more positive sibling relationship. This vignette describes three sisters who have 'strong emotional bonds with each other', who play together, and are protective and loving towards one another.

During the interview, the social workers were asked to read each of these vignettes or scenarios in turn, imagining that it was a case that they had been given and that they had to make a decision regarding the placement of the siblings. Whilst reading, they were asked to 'think aloud' and explain their decision-making. At the end of each vignette, they were asked to state their decision regarding whether they would place the siblings together or apart.

Through the use of these vignettes, I hoped to be able to answer the research questions relating to the use of heuristics, and also identify what information social workers attended to when making this decision.

Following these vignettes, a set of questions were designed which aimed to provide further insight into the social workers' decision-making and thus answer the research questions (see Appendix 3 for a copy of the interview schedule). These questions related to whether the social worker had received any training regarding sibling placement, what assessment tools (if any) they used when faced with this type of decision, what factors they consider to be important when making these decisions, which other people (if any) might influence their decision-making, and the constraints that they felt made their decision-making more difficult.

Three questions were then asked which referred to the use of heuristics: the familiarity heuristic (where a decision matches decisions that the individual has made in the past, McCammon (2004)), the social proof heuristic (where a decision is based on the decisions that other people are making, McCammon (2004)) and the take-the-best heuristic (where a decision is based on one key reason, Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999). These three heuristics were selected, as they were the ones most commonly discussed in the research literature relating to human decision-making within psychology (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999).

A final question explained the use of heuristics to the social workers, and asked them to consider whether they used any mental shortcuts or heuristics when making their decisions. Although the use of heuristics has been thought of as process of which the individual is unaware, I felt that the three previous questions which introduce the idea of heuristics may have helped the social workers to identify any potential heuristics or shortcuts that they utilise in their decision-making. It was hoped that this question would allow me to identify any further heuristics which the social workers might rely on as part of their decision-making.

5.7.2 Challenges of interviewing in qualitative research

Although interviews are a common method used in qualitative research (Runswick-Cole, 2011), a number of challenges posed by such an approach have been highlighted. Robson (2002) notes that conducting interviews can be time-consuming, which may be problematic for the researcher and may reduce the number of people willing to participate in the research. To ensure that this did not impact negatively upon my research, I ensured that the participants were aware of approximately how

long the interview would take, and also ensured that the interview schedule contained a number of questions that could be answered realistically within this time period.

Another challenge noted by Robson (2002) is that interviews are not standardised, which may raise concerns about reliability. However, I felt that this was not a significant concern, as I was exploring individual decision-making and interviews seemed to be the best method for gathering the rich information that I required.

Runswick-Cole (2011) states that one of the challenges for the qualitative research interview is that they have been overused and that 'researchers rely disproportionately on interviews as a research method' (p. 91). Again, this particular challenge did not concern me, as I felt that there is little to no research that has used this method for exploring the decision-making of social workers in this particular context. Therefore, I felt that the use of interviews, as opposed to any other research method, was justified in this case. I also worked hard to ensure that the interview schedule was high quality through careful review of the literature, discussion with my research supervisor and conducting a pilot study.

Runswick-Cole (2011) also cites 'positionality' as a challenge for the interview method (p. 91). By this, Runswick-Cole (2011) means that aspects of the researcher's knowledge, values and experiences that might influence the study, including factors such as gender, race, class and disability. None of the participants who took part in my research study were known to me, other than the social worker who took part in the pilot study. I had not met any of the other social workers prior to

the interview. This may have reduced the impact of positionality, as there was no power imbalance (Burman & Whelan, 2011) and my position as a Trainee EP researcher was made clear to the participants prior to the interview commencing.

5.7.2.1 Reflexivity

Bryman (2008) suggests that 'social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate' (p. 682). As a researcher, this involves being sensitive to your own culture and social context (Bryman, 2008) and acknowledging your role as part of the construction of knowledge throughout the research process (Haynes, 2012).

Lynch (2000) suggests that a researcher should engage in philosophical self-reflection (looking at one's own beliefs and assumptions), methodological self-consciousness (exploring the relationship between oneself and what you are studying) and methodological self-criticism (being self-critical). In order to ensure reflexivity throughout the conduct of the research study, I examined my own beliefs and assumptions regarding siblings and their placement, and my views of social workers and their decision-making. I believe that social workers have a challenging role and are often required to make difficult decisions. I also have a strong, positive relationship with my own brother and for this reason value the sibling relationship. Throughout all stages of this research, it is important to acknowledge the impact that these beliefs have on my interpretation of the findings and my own decision-making

regarding the stages of research. I will return to this idea of reflexivity in the final chapter of this Volume.

In terms of being 'methodologically self-conscious' (Lynch, 2000), it is important to consider my relationship with the object of study. I work within the same LA as the social workers which I interviewed, but none of them were previously known to me and to my knowledge, we had not worked with any of the same children or families. As I work within the same context, it is important to consider the potential implications of the findings on my own practice and the system within which I work. This will also be explored in the final chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated my 'methodological self-criticism' (Lynch, 2000) by being explicit about the research decisions I have made.

5.7.3 Pilot study

Once the interview schedule had been developed, I felt that it would be useful to pilot it with one participant to ensure that the content of the schedule could be understood and to obtain their views or comments. I also felt that conducting a pilot study would provide me with the opportunity to practise using the schedule and test the recording device.

One participant volunteered to take part in the pilot study. This participant was an experienced social worker who had dealt with a number of cases where he had to

decide whether to place siblings together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements.

This pilot study led to minor changes being made to both of the vignettes. The first vignette was amended to make the scenario more ambiguous. It was felt that ambiguity was desirable so as not to lead the participants to respond in a particular way. Two paragraphs were removed: the first gave additional background information which the social worker felt was 'too negative'. The second was removed as it was felt that it provided unnecessary information.

The second vignette was also amended to make it more ambiguous. The social worker who took part in the pilot study felt that the scenario described in this vignette was 'too positive'. An additional sentence was added to this vignette that suggested that there were some negative aspects of the sibling relationship described.

No changes were made to the questions in the interview schedule, as the social worker felt that they were easy to understand and he was able to answer them. A final question was added which asked the participants if there were any further comments or reflections that they would like to make on their decision-making. This was included as it was felt that it would be helpful to provide them with the opportunity to comment on things that they might not have initially thought of when answering the questions.

5.7.4 Recruitment

Participants were invited to take part in this study via a convenience sampling method, whereby the 'nearest and most convenient' (p.265, Robson, 2002) persons were invited to take part. This approach was felt to be appropriate, as within case study design, sampling techniques are unimportant (Thomas, 2011), with the focus being simply on selecting participants that will allow you to study the object of the case study (social workers' decision-making) in depth. In this way, purposeful sampling, such as the convenience sampling method chose here, is appropriate (Bryman, 2008). By sampling social workers in this way, I aimed to get a sample that would be representative of the population of social workers within the LA.

An email advertisement was sent to all of the social workers within the LA who had been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings within the last six months. This time frame was included, so that their reflections on their decision-making were relatively recent. These social workers had been identified by a senior member of their team who assisted me with the recruitment of participants.

A copy of the recruitment advertisement is included in Appendix 4 of this volume.

The social workers who expressed an interest in taking part in an interview were contacted with a provisional date and time for when the interview would be held. These were flexible and were altered if the social worker was unable to attend on their designated day or time.

5.7.5 Sample

Seven social workers expressed an interest in taking part and were given an interview slot. However, one social worker did not turn up to the designated interview slot and did not respond to follow-up contact to attempt to re-arrange the interview. In total, six social workers were interviewed as part of the research.

Three of the social workers were employed within the Looked After Children's Team, meaning that they worked solely with children in foster care, residential or adoptive placements. The other three social workers were employed within one of the LA's three social care 'Locality Teams' who work with Looked After Children, but also have a wider remit and work with 'Child in Need' and 'Child Protection' cases. All had been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings.

This sample of social workers could be considered to be a small sample. However, it is important to note that not all social workers within the LA had been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings, and so would not have been eligible to take part. Similarly, many of the social workers may have felt that they were unable to give their time to take part in the research, as the LA is reported to be under-staffed in terms of social workers, so their caseloads are likely to be high. Finally, a small sample does not reduce the validity of the findings from the research, as it is with the social workers' decision-making processes within this LA with which the study is concerned. The selection of social workers within this study may not be representative of all social workers, but will provide an insight into the decision-

making of social workers within this LA, which is what the case study design aims to explore (Thomas, 2011).

5.7.6 Interview procedure

All of the social workers were interviewed in a private room in the LA building where they were based. The average length of interview was 30 minutes, with the shortest lasting 22 minutes and the longest lasting 39 minutes.

Prior to the commencement of each interview, participants were provided with a 'Participant Information Sheet' and a 'Consent Form' (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 5 respectively). The Participant Information Sheet outlined the purpose of the study, the potential benefits of the study, details of the interview process, issues around confidentiality and anonymity, details of how to withdraw from the study and the process following the interview regarding storage of data and the plan for debriefing. The researcher's contact details were provided, along with the contact details for the University of Birmingham Supervising Tutor, so that the participant could ask further questions if necessary.

The participants were asked to read this sheet, and then sign the Consent Form, ticking to confirm that they had read the Participant Information Sheet, that they understood their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study within six months of taking part and that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

Each of the interviews was recorded using a digital device. Participants were asked for their consent regarding this and all agreed.

5.7.7 Ethical considerations

In line with the University of Birmingham's process for ethical approval for research, I completed an Application for Ethical Review Form prior to the commencement of this study (see Appendix 6). Confirmation of ethical approval was received on 22nd April 2013. Recruitment of participants and data collection did not start until after this date.

The research was completed in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) and complied with the four principles outlined in this Code: respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, scientific value, social responsibility, and maximising benefit and minimising harm (p.37). A number of ethical issues were also considered during the design of the research and data collection:

Consent

Valid consent was obtained in line with Section 4 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). Before the interviews took place, the social workers were given written information regarding the nature and purpose of the research, consent, their right to withdraw and how their data would be stored and used. They were asked to sign a consent form indicating that they had read and understood this information.

Debriefing

Once the research was completed, the findings were presented to the key stakeholders of the research (the Head of the Looked After Children's Team and the Educational Psychology Service) and all of the participants were given the opportunity to attend this presentation.

The social workers who took part in the interviews were also given time to ask any questions after the interview. A note of thanks to all of the participants was also posted in the LA's newsletter. Thus, appropriate debriefing was offered in line with Section 8 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010).

The participants will also have the ability to access the complete Doctoral Thesis held by the University Learning Centre if they wish to. A Public Domain Briefing (see Appendix 10) also provides a detailed summary of the research study.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was maintained in line with Section 5 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). The participants' names were not linked to their interviews. Each interview was allocated a number, which only the researcher knew which participant it was linked to. It is unlikely that participants can be identified from the anonymous transcripts. Data was not shared with anyone (aside from the researcher) in its raw form. The transcripts were kept in a secure filing cabinet in a locked LA office. Electronic data (the recordings) was stored on a password protected, encrypted laptop.

Risks

There were limited risks (as defined in Section 3 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, 2010) to the individuals involved in the research. One potential risk to the participants was that the interviews may have uncovered information of a sensitive or emotional nature which may have led to the participants doubting the decisions they had made regarding the placement of siblings. However, this was unlikely as the interview questions were asked in a non-directive, exploratory way and did not relate specifically to their casework. Also, the researcher conducting the interviews had experience in dealing with potentially emotionally-laden conversations and sensitive information. Further support would have been offered to the participants if necessary. Any information raised that had highlighted safeguarding issues would have been dealt with following the LA's safeguarding procedures.

5.8 Data analysis

5.8.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis has a long history of being used across a range of disciplines, including psychology, as an exploratory process for encoding qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as 'a way of seeing' (p. 1) and states that there are three phases to this type of analysis: recognizing the information ('seeing'), encoding it ('seeing it as something') and interpretation. Themes in the data can be identified inductively, directly from the raw data, or deductively, from theory or prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that such an approach fits in with a critical realist epistemology, as it acknowledges 'the ways individuals make meaning of their experience', whilst also

taking into account ‘the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’” (p. 81).

The approach to thematic analysis has been outlined by a number of authors (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I decided to use the process described by Boyatzis (1998), as this allows for the use of both deductive and inductive thematic analysis, and the author provides a clear step-by-step guide to analysis that I hope will provide a rigorous approach.

5.8.2 Inductive vs. deductive thematic analysis

Boyatzis (1998) describes three different ways of developing a thematic code:

- 1) Theory driven thematic analysis – codes are developed that are consistent with the researcher’s own theory, or the theory of another researcher
- 2) Prior data or prior research driven thematic analysis – codes are developed on the basis of prior research
- 3) Inductive (from the raw data) or data driven thematic analysis – codes are constructed directly from the raw data

To answer my research questions, I felt that inductive or data driven thematic analysis was required for the first three questions. I felt that this was the most appropriate approach as I did not know what information the social workers would give relating to these questions (regarding the key pieces of information that they

attend to, the constraints they face when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings and which other people might influence their decision-making).

For the fourth research question (regarding what heuristics social workers might use when making these decisions), I felt that a deductive, theory-driven approach was most appropriate. I already had a prior 'theory' regarding which heuristics the social workers might rely on when making decisions, and felt that it would be useful to try and identify these in the raw data collected. An inductive approach would not be appropriate for attempting to answer this research question, as heuristics tend to be used unconsciously, and so the social workers were unlikely to refer to these explicitly in their answers. This would make it difficult to identify heuristics directly from the raw data. It is more useful to use a deductive approach and look at specific elements of the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Theory-driven thematic analysis has a number of weaknesses. These include potentially lower inter-rater reliability and lower validity, as the codes are not based on the raw data and the codes were not developed in the specific context of the type of material being coded (Boyatzis, 1998). Data-driven thematic analysis does not have these weaknesses. However, both approaches can provide detailed and useful exploratory information (Boyatzis, 1998).

5.8.3 Issues of sampling

Boyatzis (1998) argues that sampling is a key issue when conducting any form of thematic analysis. He argues that it is important to define the setting, the event, and

the people when sampling. In this particular research, the setting is a particular organisation (the LA in which I work). The event is the decision-making process when considering whether to place siblings together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements. The people are the social workers that are involved in this decision-making.

Boyatzis (1998) also suggests that the 'unit of analysis' is defined; the unit of analysis is 'the entity on which the interpretation of the study will focus' (p. 62). In this research study, the unit of analysis would be the social workers who are involved in decision-making. Boyatzis (1998) also suggests that the 'unit of coding' should be defined; this is 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (p. 63). The unit of coding in my research study is the list of themes that are identified, either inductively or deductively, from the raw data. Boyatzis (1998) defines a 'theme' as 'a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (p. 4).

The following sections will describe in detail the process involved in analysing the data collected.

5.8.4 Inductive thematic analysis

5.8.4.1 Reducing the raw information

I read the transcripts of the six interviews several times, to ensure that the raw data was familiar to me. The interviews had been transcribed, focusing on the content

only. Any non-verbal utterances and pauses were not included in the transcription. I had listened to the interviews again, following the transcription to check for accuracy and reliability of the transcribing process. See Appendix 7 for an example of a transcribed interview.

At the start of my analysis, I summarized the information from each transcript, looking at each unit of analysis (each social worker) individually, and taking each interview question in turn.

The summaries took the form of brief notes, paraphrasing the key points that each social worker raised in their responses. See Appendix 8 for an example of a 'reduced' interview.

5.8.4.2 Identifying themes

I then compared my summaries across the data set and looked for patterns or similarities across this subsample. The summaries or outlines were used, as opposed to the raw data, as they reflect 'an initial processing of the information' (p. 86) and a convenient place to begin perceiving themes according to Boyatzis (1998).

The aim of this stage was to begin to identify potential themes. See Appendix 9 for potential themes identified at this stage of the analysis.

5.8.4.3 Creating a code

Once preliminary themes and patterns in the data had been identified, codes could be identified. Some of the preliminary themes were combined into one thematic code, as it was felt that they reflected a similar concept or theme that would be difficult to differentiate between. Some of the themes occurred in only one or two of the social workers' responses, and so were not considered to be 'themes' across the data sample, and were subsequently omitted.

Boyatzis (1998) states that a good thematic code should have a label or name, a definition of what the theme concerns, a description of how to know when the theme occurs, a description of any qualifications or exclusions to the identification of the theme, and examples (both positive and negative) to eliminate possible confusion when looking for the theme (p. 31). This was taken into account when identifying and defining the final codes for analysing the data set.

I then re-read all of the interviews, looking for the presence or absence of each of these codes, and annotated the raw data accordingly.

5.8.4.4 Determining the reliability of the code

To determine the reliability of the code I had developed, I asked a colleague with a basic understanding of thematic analysis to look over the analysis of one of the interviews. I shared the codes that I had developed with this individual and asked them to look at the interview from Social Worker 1. I asked them to read the interview, and attempt to code it.

Their coding did not exactly match mine, but there was at least one example of each theme that we both agreed upon and coded in the same way. This suggested that the code was reasonably reliable.

5.8.4.5 Validating and using the code

Once I had decided on the themes and their codes, I looked through the raw data again, and coded it using these. This helped to validate the code.

5.8.5 Deductive thematic analysis

For the deductive thematic analysis that attempted to answer the fourth research question, a similar process as described above was used. However, the themes and codes had already been identified through prior research and theory. The following heuristics, identified from the vast body of research literature, were used as codes:

Heuristic	Description
Confidence heuristic	The decision-maker chooses an option based on the confidence with which this option is presented by an advisory individual. (Price & Stone, 2004)
Familiarity heuristic	The decision-maker chooses the option that matches with decisions they have made in the past. (McCammon, 2004)
Priority heuristic	The decision-maker goes through the options and chooses the option that gives the maximum gain. (Brandstätter et al., 2006)
Social proof heuristic	The decision-maker selects the option that other people are selecting. (McCammon, 2002)
Take-the-best heuristic	One-reason decision-making; selecting the most valid option (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999), but if that does not help them decide between the options, moving on to the next most valid option, and so on. (Bröder, 2003; Newell & Shanks, 2003)

Table 4. Heuristics used as codes for the deductive thematic analysis.

These heuristics were chosen, as I thought that these appeared most relevant to the area of decision-making at hand (regarding the placement of siblings) and they are among the most commonly cited examples of heuristics in the research literature (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999), and so perhaps have the most robust evidence base for their use in everyday decision-making.

To conduct the deductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), I used the summaries of the interviews (developed as part of the inductive thematic analysis process (Boyatzis, 1998), detailed above) and looked for where these heuristics could be seen in the data.

Once I had identified where I thought that these heuristics had been used, I returned to the raw data and examined these sections in more detail. I then coded the raw data, noting where the social worker had used one of the heuristics described above.

5.8.6 Challenges with thematic analysis

Boyatzis (1998) identifies what he terms three 'obstacles to effective thematic analysis' (p. 12). The first is 'projection' where the researcher attributes to another person something that is their own emotion or attitude. The second is 'sampling' which occurs if the raw data is contaminated by factors of which the researcher is not aware. This has an impact on the analysis and interpretation of the data. The final obstacle identified by Boyatzis (1998) is the 'mood and style of the researcher', as thematic analysis is a subjective approach.

Table 5 below highlights the steps taken to attempt to reduce or lessen the impact of these three obstacles:

Obstacle	Steps taken
Projection	<p>Ensuring that an explicit set of codes were established.</p> <p>Establishing good inter-rater reliability.</p> <p>During the inductive thematic analysis, I ensured that the developed codes and themes were based closely on the raw data.</p> <p>Having an awareness of my own views and opinions, and ensuring that I did not project these onto the views and opinions of the social workers.</p>
Sampling	<p>Clarifying the unit of analysis versus the unit of coding prior to starting the thematic analysis.</p> <p>Establishing a protocol (interview schedule) for data collection.</p>
Mood and style of the researcher	<p>Ensuring that I was rested and in the right frame of mind for analysing the data.</p> <p>Developing a clear and explicit set of codes.</p> <p>Ensuring consistency of judgement by having clearly defined codes.</p> <p>Attempting to suspend my own judgments on what was said during the interviews.</p>

Table 5. The steps taken to reduce the impact of obstacles to effective thematic analysis identified by Boyatzis (1998).

5.9 Summary

This chapter has provided details of the methodology that I have used to explore the research aims and attempt to answer the research questions. The next chapter will focus on the data collected and summarise the findings of this study. Links will also be made with the findings from the literature reviewed in Chapters 2-4 of this Volume.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the present research study. The themes identified through the thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) will be highlighted and discussed in relation to each of the four research questions, developed from the literature review in Chapters 2-4 of this volume. Links will be made with previous research and findings highlighted within the literature review.

6.1.1 Research questions

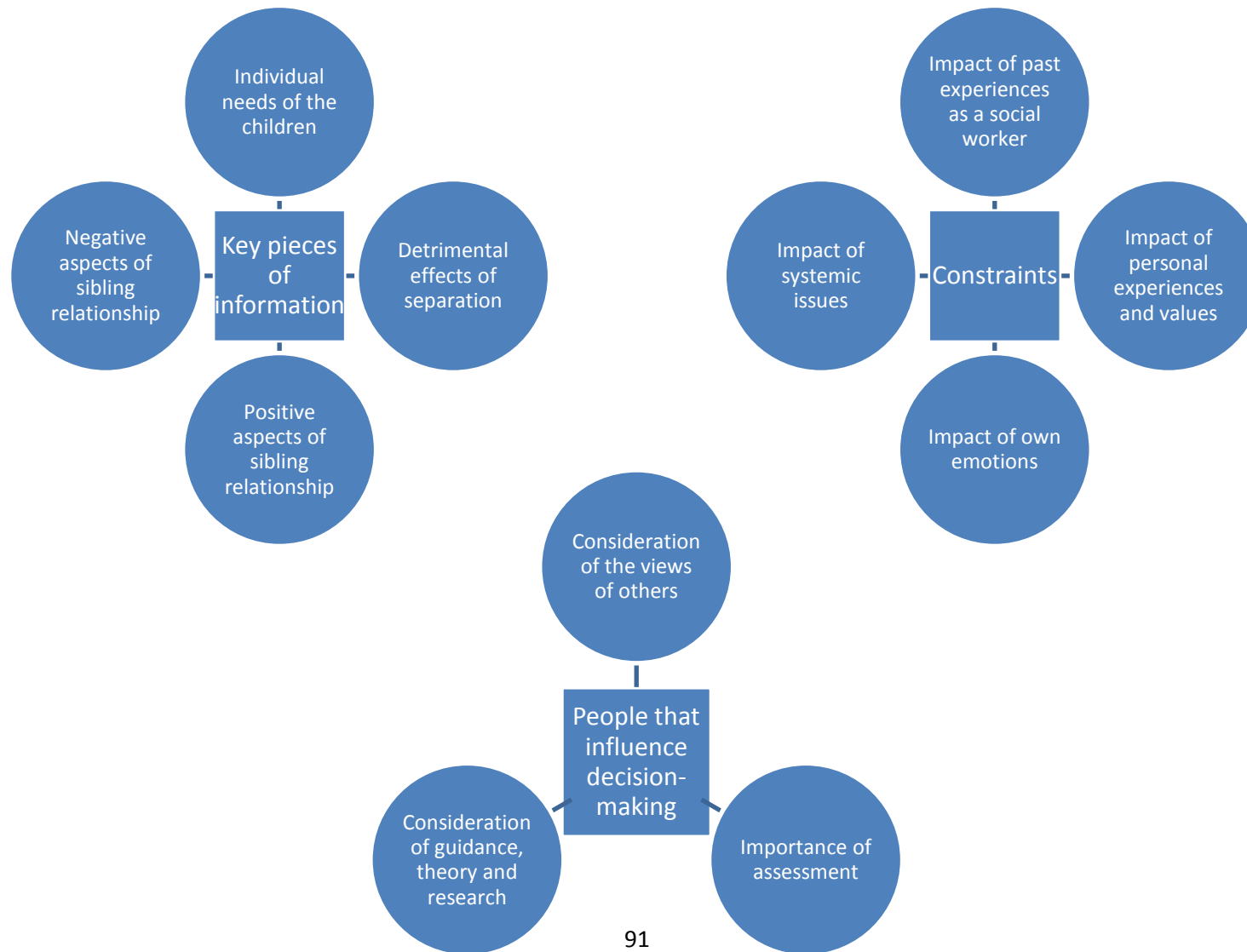
For ease of reference, the research questions are presented again:

1. What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?
2. What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?
3. Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?
4. What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

6.2 Inductive thematic analysis

The first three research questions will be considered in turn. The themes identified through the inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) are illustrated in Figure 5. The themes relating to each question will be presented along with pertinent extracts from the raw data that reflect these themes. Links will then be made between the data, the local context and the literature detailed in Chapters 2-4 of this Volume.

Figure 5. Visual representation of the themes.



It is important to note that the themes are not ranked or ordered in terms of importance or significance. I felt that this would not be helpful, as I felt that the number of times each theme was mentioned did not necessarily indicate its importance. Instead, the number of times a theme was mentioned may have been the result of the type of questions that I asked during the interview. The themes are presented with a note indicating how many of the social workers showed this theme.

6.2.1 Research question 1: What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?

From the raw data, four themes emerged that highlighted the key pieces of information that the social workers attended to when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings. These are highlighted in Figure 6 below.

<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 1</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Individual needs of the children</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker makes reference to the needs of one child in the sibling group and/or not favouring one child in the sibling group over another.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker says “meeting each child’s needs”, “not making a decision that benefits one child over another”, “the best interests of the child” or discusses one child within the sibling group and their needs as an individual.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 2</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Detrimental effects of separation</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker comments on perceived detrimental or negative effects of separating a sibling group.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker uses a phrase with negative connotations regarding separating the sibling group.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> Social Workers 1, 3 and 6 showed this theme; Social Workers 2, 4 and 5 did not.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 3</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Positive aspects of sibling relationship</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker comments on positive aspects that may be evident within a sibling relationship.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker says anything that can be perceived as a</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 4</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Negative aspects of sibling relationship</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker comments on negative aspects that may be evident within a sibling relationship.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker says anything that can be perceived as a</p>

positive aspect of the sibling relationship they are discussing. <u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.	negative aspect of the sibling relationship they are discussing. <u>Differentiation:</u> Social Workers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 showed this theme; Social Worker 4 did not.
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Figure 6. Themes relating to Research Question 1.

The data suggested that there were four key pieces of information that the social workers seemed to rely on when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings: the individual needs of the children, the detrimental effects of separation, the positive aspects of the sibling relationship, and the negative aspects of the sibling relationship. Each of the factors, or themes, will be considered in turn.

6.2.1.1 Theme 1: Individual needs of the children

One key factor which all of the social workers reflected on was the importance of considering the individual needs of each of the children within the sibling group. When reading through the two vignettes, and ‘thinking aloud’, all of the social workers remarked on the needs of one or more of the children individually. Whilst answering the interview questions, the social workers also frequently made reference to considering the child as an individual, recognising that their needs might differ from other children within the sibling group and also the importance of not seeing one child’s needs as more important than another’s needs.

Box 1 below highlights some examples of what the social workers said regarding the individual needs of the children.

"My initial thoughts were that maybe Lennie, potentially... Lennie may potentially benefit from some time apart from his sister..."

"...I make a decision on what I feel is in the best interest of the child which means their needs..."

[Social Worker 1]

"...we have to look at their age, their development, their needs..."

"...I'd need to know a lot more about the children's individual needs."

"...each child's particular needs..."

[Social Worker 2]

"...you cannot split the children up for the natural benefit of one to the natural detriment of another..."

"Is this the best interests of this child?"

"You can't split two kids for the natural benefit of one..."

[Social Worker 3]

"...it would help Jane coz... she really needs to flourish in her own right."

"...one child mustn't be sacrificed for the sake of the other..."

[Social Worker 4]

"...maybe if they are apart she's then given the chance to grow as a child."

"...if there was any significant health conditions that may impact on one child's care..."

[Social Worker 5]

"...destructive or damaging to the other sibling?"

[Social Worker 6]

Box 1. Examples of social workers' comments relating to Theme 1: Individual needs of the children.

This theme follows the current guidance available, which states that decisions regarding the placement of siblings should be based on an assessment of the individual circumstances of each child (DfE, 2012a; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004). Lord and Borthwick (2008) also state that 'a full assessment of each child independently should be completed'.

The idea that one should consider the individual needs of all of the children within the sibling group, and not favour one over another, is in line with the current statutory guidance in the UK, which states that siblings should be placed together unless this would not be in the best interests of one or more of the sibling group (Department for Education, 2012a).

Thus, it seems appropriate that all of the social workers interviewed considered viewing each child as an individual and considering their specific needs as an important part of the decision-making process. Within the LA, this finding could be shared with the social workers as a potential strength of their decision-making. The social workers within the LA appear to be working within the relevant legislation and guidelines available.

6.2.1.2 Theme 2: Detrimental effects of separation

The perceived detrimental effects of separating siblings was also a key piece of information that social workers attended to when making decisions regarding placement. Three of the six social workers commented this theme. This appeared to influence the decision-making of these three social workers, as they appeared to want to try and avoid these effects. It is not clear what the social workers based these thoughts on. It may have been that they had read research literature relating to the negative effects of separating siblings, it may have been through experience as a social worker, or their own beliefs regarding siblings and the importance of the sibling relationship.

Box 2 below shows examples of comments made by these three social workers regarding this theme.

“...if it was detrimental to one or both’s emotional wellbeing, physical, social development...”
“...emotional impact on the children if you are to separate...”
“...the contact arrangements...if you do choose to separate...”
[Social Worker 1]

“...what I’d be worried about with splitting these two is that they’d both fall to pieces.”
[Social Worker 3]

“...what the impact of that would be actually, erm... their vulnerabilities and stuff like that...”
[Social Worker 6]

Box 2. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 2: Detrimental effects of separation.

The three social workers that commented on this theme followed the line presented in much of the research literature that keeping siblings together is likely to produce optimal outcomes, whereas separation may lead to detrimental effects on the children. For example, Conger et al. (2009) found that placing children apart from their siblings led to a weaker sense of identity and less stable placements. Herrick and Piccus (2005) found that separation from siblings may have a negative impact on a child’s emotional well-being, including increased feelings of anxiety and grief. Hegar (2005) noted that siblings can act as an emotional support for one another. These ideas are reflected in the comments of the social workers outlined above.

Within the context of the case study, it would seem that the social workers have some knowledge or understanding, even if only at a basic level, of the research literature relating to the separation of children from their siblings. To build on this knowledge, a workshop or training session could be delivered to the social workers,

perhaps in conjunction with the Educational Psychology Service (who could perhaps be involved in developing and delivering this training), with a particular focus on the importance of the sibling relationship in child development and an exploration of relevant research conducted to date that has explored this area.

6.2.1.3 Theme 3: Positive aspects of the sibling relationship

All six social workers commented on the positive aspects of the sibling relationship they were describing, either related to the vignettes or cases they discussed from their own experience. This suggests that these positive aspects are a key piece of information which the social workers attended to when making their decisions. All were able to identify positive qualities between siblings and all seemed to think that these were pertinent to the decision-making process.

Box 3 below highlights comments related to this theme.

“I think their relationships, erm, that they’ve got, are appropriate.”
“...they are very trusting of each other...”
“...you’re looking at their relationships, their bond, their attachments towards each other...”
[Social Worker 1]

“The fact that they’re actually, erm, enjoying something together, which is singing, is, is a real positive.”
“...strong emotional bonds...”
“...protective and loving towards each other...”
“I think there’s lots of positive things there...”
[Social Worker 2]

“...they clearly reciprocate the same feelings towards each other...”
“You would probably find that it was off the scale, erm, for a positive relationship.”
“They’ve had the same shared experience, they’ve been each other’s crutch, they know and trust each other.”
“They’ve had the same shared experience...”
[Social Worker 3]

“...the closeness is the... the talking point...”

[Social Worker 4]

“...Jane being able to engage in positive behaviour...”

“...in terms of like play and engagement they’re quite content with one another...”

[Social Worker 5]

“...there’s some positives in the relationship that can be worked on...”

“They show some understanding that they’re siblings...”

“There’s some playing together...”

“...it’s attachment to one another...”

“...whether there are positives in the relationship...”

“...look at the positives in the relationship...”

[Social Worker 6]

Box 3. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 3: Positive aspects of the sibling relationship.

These reflections on the positive aspects of sibling relationships are similar to those reported in the literature. For example, siblings can teach us about resolving conflict and how to interact with others (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006; Conger et al., 2009). They also provide emotional support (Hegar, 2005) and in children who have experienced time in the care system, can provide understanding related to having the same shared experiences (Shlonsky et al., 2005a). The social workers interviewed appeared to recognise some of these positives that may be found in a sibling relationship, and considered them to be an important influence in their decision-making regarding the placement of the children.

6.2.1.4 Theme 4: Negative aspects of the sibling relationship

All but one of the social workers also commented on potentially negative aspects of the sibling relationship that would influence their decision-making, suggesting that this is another key piece of information that social workers attend to. One social worker in particular (Social Worker 3) appeared to focus heavily on the negative

aspects of the sibling relationships, either those described in the vignette or those described from her previous experience of casework in this area. Box 4 highlights examples of comments that social workers made regarding the negative aspects of the sibling relationship.

“...the attention-seeking...”

“...dependency on each other.”

“...is there any sexual behaviours, is there any scapegoating, is there any bullying?”

“...if there’s an allegation of sexual abuse...”

[Social Worker 1]

“They have a challenging relationship with each other.”

“Lennie can be attention-seeking, which is perhaps part of his needs and his relationship with, with the sister is affected by his needs.”

“They do not have any pride in each other, critical of each other...”

“...a little bit over-dependent on each other...”

“...sometimes there’s rivalry between the younger ones...”

[Social Worker 2]

“...a ‘skewed relationship’ with each other.”

“...there seems to be a lot of negative, likes she hates her brother...”

“...she’s probably not just a sibling, but she’s probably what I would call a ‘pseudo-parent’ as well...”

“...the child doesn’t reciprocate...”

“...the reinforcement of one’s, erm, traumatic material...”

“...physical aggression and really domineering behaviour...”

“...an argument could be made here that they’re too close...”

“We could have sexualised behaviour here...”

“...there was also incidences of her hitting him...”

“...she would say negative things about her brother...”

[Social Worker 3]

“...there seems to some quite negatives in their relationship...”

“...it seems quite one-sided...”

“...the older brother’s challenging behaviour...”

“...if a sibling exhibits sexualised behaviour...if the sibling is always scapegoating...”

“...honing in on that one erm... that one negative...”

[Social Worker 5]

“...it’s challenging...”

“...they can’t allow each other this independence...”

“...a bit more damaging...”

“...becoming focused on the arguments or the competition...”

“...how dangerous the competitiveness had become between these siblings...”
[Social Worker 6]

Box 4. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 4: Negative aspects of the sibling relationship.

These examples relate to the research literature which has explored reasons as to why it is sometimes beneficial to separate children from their siblings. For example, higher levels of aggression may be found between children who have experienced domestic violence (Conger et al., 2009). Herrick and Piccus (2005) also noted that by keeping siblings together, previous traumatic experiences may be relived and reinforced. The literature also refers to the idea of ‘parentification’, which was mentioned by several of the social workers. This occurs when one child ‘parents’ another within the sibling group, which may lead to negative outcomes (Conger et al., 2009). Lord and Borthwick (2008) also present ‘key factors’ which may lead a social worker to decide to place siblings apart, including intense rivalry and jealousy, exploitation, chronic scapegoating of one child, maintaining unhelpful hierarchical positions, highly sexualised behaviour with each other, and acting as triggers to each other’s traumatic material and potentially constantly re-traumatising each other (pp. 19-23). All five social workers that showed this theme commented on one or more of these key factors.

Within the context of the case study, this theme, along with the previous theme, suggests that social workers tend to ‘weigh up’ the positive and negative aspects of the sibling relationship. It may be worthwhile to highlight this to the social workers, as it may not be a conscious process. Similarly, it may be useful to conduct a

workshop or focus group within the LA exploring social workers' views on what they consider to be positive or negative aspects. These could then be used to develop good practice within the LA, by considering what resources could be deployed to build on the positives and reduce the negatives. Again, the Educational Psychology Service could support this, both in a role as researcher and also by offering therapeutic support for the siblings and supervision for the social workers.

6.2.2 Research question 2: What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?

During the interviews, the social workers highlighted a number of constraints which they faced when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings. These were organised into four themes, shown in Figure 7 below:

<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 5</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Impact of past experiences as a social worker</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker talks about a previous case/sibling group/child/family that they have worked with in the past.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> The social worker mentions a case (either with or without using names) that they have been involved with in the past, such as “one case I’ve worked on” or “one group of siblings I worked with”.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 6</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Impact of personal experiences and values</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker comments on their own experiences of sibling relationships and/or makes reference to their personal values/beliefs.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker discusses “my siblings/brothers/sisters” or makes reference to “my children”, or when they explicitly state “my value/belief is...”.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> Social Workers 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 showed this theme; Social Worker 5 did not.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 7</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Impact of own emotions</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker mentions or makes reference to their own feelings or emotions during the decision-making process.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker directly or indirectly discusses their</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 8</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Impact of systemic issues</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker makes reference to a systemic issue (at a local or national level) that affects the decision-making process.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker mentions something that affects their</p>

feelings regarding the decision-making, such as “I find it hard” or “it saddens me”. <u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.	decision-making that could be considered to be a systemic issue at a local or national level, such as “training issues”, “timescales”, “caseloads” or “lack of placements”. <u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.
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Figure 7. Themes relating to Research Question 2.

Four themes highlighted the constraints which social workers felt affected their decision-making in this area: the impact of their previous experiences (or lack of) as a social workers, the impact of their personal experiences and values, the impact of their own emotions and the impact of systemic issues.

6.2.2.1 Theme 5: Impact of past experiences as a social worker

The social workers all mentioned something relating to their past experiences as a social worker. Payne and Bettman (2004) suggest that there are constraints within the human mind that influence decision-making, and the impact of past experience appeared to be one of them. This seemed to constrain the social workers’ decision-making to some extent, as it may have led them to make a particular decision. All six social workers reflected on their past experiences as a social worker, normally by talking about previous cases that they were currently or had been involved with, as show in Box 5. It would seem that their past experiences of work in this area influenced the way that they approached future decision-making regarding the placement of siblings.

“I’ve got a sibling group of...eight, and they’ve all been separated...”
 “I’ve also got a sibling group of three...”
 “...in one particular family that I’ve worked with...”
 “...I’ve recently said that, erm, a young boy won’t have any contact...”
 [Social Worker 1]

"...which is something that as a social worker I've come across..."
 "I've known a lot of carers..."
 "...sometimes I've known people to place a little one with older ones..."
 "I've... trained myself through... working with a lot of sibling groups..."
 "...last year I had a group of eight siblings..."
 "I've also worked with big families..."
 "I'm working with a couple of children at the moment who are actually placed..."
 "I've got a child, an Afghanistani family..."
 "...I've placed siblings together..."
 "I've got a situation at the moment..."
 [Social Worker 2]

"...in a family that I've been working with..."
 "Well when I did my first one..."
 "...the one child... was much more open to a relationship with his elder sister..."
 "...on ones where I've done sibling attachment..."
 "I spent a good hour sitting in the foster carer's garden..."
 "I've just been embroiled in a bit of a discussion about that..."
 "...I've been in this job 14 months now..."
 [Social Worker 3]

"...a case I had previously of twins..."
 "...when I did my report..."
 "...if you've worked in a particular field, you get to know... the outcome?"
 "...I had three cases where we couldn't find adopters..."
 [Social Worker 4]

"...we discussed my findings..."
 "...my initial thoughts were they should be separated..."
 "...if I had more experience in doing this assessments..."
 "...I didn't fully know exactly what to be looking out for..."
 "I know that with the assessment that I did..."
 "...I've had a case in court recently..."
 [Social Worker 5]

"...like when I think about when I started..."
 "...I guess you use your own experience as well..."
 "I've done one with the Together or Apart and I did one in the past..."
 "...when I got allocated the case..."
 "...one of mine was to conclude that these children who were meant to be adopted..."
 "...now I've had several sets of siblings..."
 "I remember doing one and I just kept saying..."
 [Social Worker 6]

Box 5. Examples of social workers' comments relating to Theme 5: Impact of past experiences as a social worker.

This suggests that social workers' previous experiences in that role are likely to impact upon their decision-making. Howe et al. (2000) noted that a social worker's previous experiences may influence their approach to future casework. This is reflected in the responses of the social workers here, who all commented on at least one case that they had been involved with, despite not being explicitly asked to do so.

Within the LA in which this research was conducted, it may be important to highlight the impact of previous experiences as a social workers in the social workers day-to-day work, as this may be something of which they are currently unaware. By encouraging reflective practice, perhaps during the supervision sessions with EPs that are currently being trialled, social workers may become more aware of the impact of this theme. Similarly, lack of experience in the area of sibling relationships and associated decision-making was highlighted; this is something that could be supported through 'in-house' training sessions and supervision.

6.2.2.2 Theme 6: Impact of personal experiences and values

As well as commenting on their past experiences as a social worker, five of the six social workers interviewed also commented on their own experiences of sibling relationships and their own values regarding this (see Box 6 below). I have combined experiences and values together, as I feel that they are inextricably linked; our values stem from our own personal experiences.

<p>"I think, for me, I always... where practicably possible, siblings together... or families together..."</p> <p>"I guess that because my, my family adopted... I've got an adopted brother..."</p> <p>[Social Worker 1]</p>

“...I think of personal things... I’ve got children myself...”
“...I don’t always think that’s an automatic reason for children to be separated...”
“...I think negotiating sibling relationships is part of growing up...”
“...I think that’s very normal...”
“...I always do it with the view that unless they need to be separated...”
[Social Worker 2]

“...everybody’s got a value issue, every worker will have in the back of their mind an opinion...”
“...guided by their own values and morals...”
“...I’m quite harsh in my thinking...”
“I would like to call myself strong...”
“...what’s my gut instinct here?”
“...it comes from your upbringing, your values – I’m an only child. This is my value base, I’ve never lived with kids, sisters. And I always desperately wanted a brother or a sister...”
[Social Worker 3]

“...my...stance is I have to start from ‘together’...”
“...this is how I see it...”
“...gut feelings as well.”
[Social Worker 4]

“...what having a sibling means...”
“...it’s about being self-aware...”
“...it’s almost like playing the hand of God...”
[Social Worker 6]

Box 6. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 6: Impact of personal experiences and values.

Little research has explored the impact of a social worker’s personal experiences and life history on their work. However, research into decision-making has noted that the personal characteristics of the decision-maker can influence this process (Beach & Mitchell, 1978). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that an individual’s personal experiences and values will have an impact on any decisions that they have to make, including social workers deciding on the placement of a sibling group.

Again, within the LA, it may be useful to highlight to social workers the impact of their personal values on their individual decision-making. This could be done through training sessions or supervision.

6.2.2.3 Theme 7: Impact of own emotions

The social workers' own emotions also appeared to act as a constraining factor on their decision-making. All of the six social workers either directly or indirectly commented on their feelings and the impact that their own emotions had on the decision-making process. Examples of their responses are displayed in Box 7. Included within this theme is the idea that the social workers found the decision-making process a challenging one, which, as a result, is likely to have had an emotional aspect to it.

"...sometimes it's about separating my professional emotions and personal emotions... Coz I'm a big softie!"
"...my emotions can, erm, have to be careful that my emotions don't become crossed..."
"...sometimes I have to battle with myself..."
"...that might be... a confidence thing with me..."
[Social Worker 1]

"...it's really difficult sometimes..."
"...through not having the confidence or it being a difficult decision..."
[Social Worker 2]

"...it's a massive decision..."
"You know, it's really difficult..."
"...I bet W is in bed now crying her eyes out over her brother..."
"...I was petrified."
[Social Worker 3]

"...go with our gut feelings."
"I'm... saddened that we do do together or apart."
[Social Worker 4]

"...such a huge decision..."
"...felt like we were being stabbed in the back..."

[Social Worker 5]

“...like playing the hand of God... it was really difficult...”

“...in terms of it being serious...”

[Social Worker 6]

Box 7. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 7: Impact of own emotions.

Howe et al. (2000) recognise that the decisions that social workers are routinely required to make may be a ‘difficult and taxing process’ (p.143). This is highlighted in the responses of the social workers noted here. However, to date there appears to be little research that has looked at this issue specifically, and this may be one area that requires further exploration and study.

The impact of emotions on decision-making could be explored with social workers in the LA through supervision or training sessions. This theme may also be relevant to other professionals within the LA that are required to make emotionally-challenging decisions, such as EPs.

6.2.2.4 Theme 8: Impact of systemic issues

All of the social workers reflected on systemic issues, either at a local or national level, which had an impact (generally a negative one) on their decision-making. They felt that these issues constrained their decision-making. Examples are highlighted in Box 8 below.

“...I wouldn’t call it training...”

“...I haven’t been on the BAAF training...”

“I guess obviously nationally there is a lack of placements...”

“...if you want to move a child you’ve got to complete what they call a ‘placement information record’... it’s just a massive document...when it’s updated it can take over an hour to do, an hour and a half to do.”

"...I guess time is a factor."

"...finding carers out there who have the... specialities..."

[Social Worker 1]

"I've read myself really, trained myself..."

"It did take a long time..."

"...they'd been placed, obviously depending on what was available at the time..."

"...if you think those eight children, they were split up when they went into care because you wouldn't, you're not gonna get a placement..."

"...availability of placements..."

"...if we can't find, erm, a culturally-appropriate placement..."

"...you've got to do lots of work again..."

"...it's more work..."

"...perhaps we'd all like a little bit more research..."

"...I've got to make a quick decision..."

"...they've got to be done in 26 weeks and that sounds like quite a long time, but it's actually a very short time."

"...you've got a very short time in which to make these decisions..."

"...they're also cutting back on experts..."

"It's all about costs..."

[Social Worker 2]

"...if we didn't do something within court timescales..."

"...the guardian's view carries a lot of weight in court."

"...everything you do is open to challenge..."

"When you're up against the timescale..."

"...I don't think that there's enough training on this assessment."

"...I think that the social workers need to be given more training on this..."

"...generally I think that the significance and importance of that assessment is overlooked."

"I think that there needs to be a standardised way of working..."

[Social Worker 3]

"I think it was a half day training, or a couple of hour training..."

"...lack of services..."

"...lack of resources..."

"...management's perception..."

"I think haste can produce a negative result, the quickness of it..."

"...you're rushed into making a decision..."

"Adopt as many as we can and looks good to the Local Authority..."

[Social Worker 4]

"...not received any training at all."

"...time's always going to be erm, a big factor."

"Maybe the resources themselves, coz I know that with the checklist I've got a 5 year old and a 6 month old, I could not use the checklist at all."

[Social Worker 5]

“...it was just a workshop really, wasn’t enough...”
 “I think it could have been erm... a whole day, at least proper, not a workshop.”
 “...your statement has to be in in less than a month. And whilst that might be 30 days, it doesn’t mean that I’ve got 30 days, full working days to focus on that, those children.”
 “...caseload, workload, the timescales that we’re given to do it...”
 “...the training that...the foster carer, who if foster carers are having sibling groups... they could benefit a lot from having similar training and a sort of tailored training to having siblings...”
 “...it’s difficult when you’re the social worker for both children... it is a bit of a conflict of interest...”
 “...if you’re making a big decision, it doesn’t matter how quick you’ve got to make it...”
 “...in the hectic turnover of work we do... even with the demands of the job.”
 [Social Worker 6]

Box 8. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 8: Impact of systemic issues

Attention has been given to systemic issues such as these within the research literature. For example, Randall et al. (2000) found that social workers face a number of constraints, including unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy, high caseloads and time pressures, and concluded that these may hinder their decision-making ability. These constraints are reflected in this theme, along with national systemic issues, such as a lack of placements and a lack of foster carers willing to take sibling groups (DfE, 2012).

Within the LA, it may be useful to highlight some of these systemic issues and constraints with the social workers, their managers and strategic directors. This may help to clarify areas where changes could be made to the processes that have a negative impact on social workers’ decision-making. An exploration of whether similar constraints affect other professionals within the LA, such as EPs, may also be pertinent to the running of a successful LA.

6.2.3 Research question 3: Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?

Three themes emerged from the data highlighted the people that would influence a social worker's decision-making within this context. These are highlighted in Figure 8:

<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 9</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Consideration of the views of others</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker makes reference to considering or seeking the views or opinions of other people when making a decision.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker names another individual and suggests that they have been involved in/been an influence during the decision-making process.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 10</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Importance of assessment</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker discusses assessment as part of the decision-making process and/or makes reference to a particular tool or method of assessment.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker names a particular assessment tool or method of assessment and states that they have used or would use this to aid their decision-making.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> All Social Workers showed this theme.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Theme 11</p> <p><u>Label:</u> Consideration of guidance, theory and research</p> <p><u>Definition:</u> The social worker makes reference to using guidance/ research/ research evidence/ theory to support their decision-making.</p> <p><u>Indicators:</u> Coded when the social worker mentions "referring to evidence/research" or names a particular theory as influencing their decision-making.</p> <p><u>Differentiation:</u> Social Workers 1, 2, 3 and 6 showed this theme; Social Workers 4 and 5 did not.</p>	

Figure 8. Themes relating to Research Question 3.

Three themes emerged that highlighted the other people that influenced the social workers' decision-making: consideration of the views of others (where they named other individuals who would influence their decision-making), the importance of

assessment (with all social workers referring to whose views they would gather as part of the assessment process) and consideration of guidance, theory and research.

6.2.3.1 Theme 9: Consideration of the views of others

All social workers were asked which other people, if any, would influence their decision-making. They all responded with at least four other individuals whose views they would wish to consider and that they felt could influence their decision-making. Whilst reading the vignettes, some of the social workers also referred to other people whose views they would wish to obtain. Table 6 below shows the 'others' identified by each social worker, either through the vignettes or in response to the interview question.

Social Worker	Others whose views they would consider
1	Children; senior colleague; carers; carers' family; school staff; independent reviewing officer; health visitor; nurse; placements team; line manager; colleagues.
2	The children; foster carers; parents; psychologists.
3	Senior colleague; the children; foster carers; contact supervisors; school staff; dinner lady; judge; legal team; guardian; parents
4	Senior colleague; children; carers; parents; other professionals attending LAC Reviews; school staff; colleagues.
5	Children; senior colleague; foster carer; family support worker; school staff; any professional involved with the children; health professionals; colleagues.
6	Senior colleague; CAMHS; carers; children; managers; professionals attending Care Plan Meeting; colleagues.

Table 6. Other people whose views a social worker would consider when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart.

As Table 6 highlights, there was some consistency in the people identified by social workers as potentially influencing their decision-making (e.g. children and carers were mentioned by everyone). However, the social workers identified a range of

different people, perhaps due to the diverse range of cases that they had been involved in. It is positive that all social workers recognised the importance of gathering the views of the children, as well as different individuals involved, as part of the assessment and decision-making process, as this is what is recommended in the current guidance available (Lord & Borthwick, 2008).

This theme has relevance to the LA, as it may be useful to explore who has the most significant influence on social workers' decision-making and a consideration of whose views should be considered within this particular decision. It may be useful to develop a good practice 'checklist' of whose views should be considered in order to promote consistency between social workers, as this was something that the LA had previously been criticised for.

6.2.3.2 Theme 10: Importance of assessment

The social workers were asked to consider what assessment tools, if any, they would use to aid their decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. All six named a particular assessment tool or alluded to a favoured method of assessment that they utilised when faced with this kind of decision. All of the social workers referred to at least one method of assessment that would involve obtaining the views of other people as part of the process. Table 7 below illustrates the range of tools or methods mentioned.

Social Worker	Assessment tool or method
1	Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008) Research in Practice (RIP) materials Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) website David Howe's book an attachment One of Wilson's books – Social Work Practice

	Observations
2	Sibling assessment Observations 'My World' book completed with children Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008)
3	Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008) Qualitative/statistical analysis Observations
4	Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008)
5	Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008) Observations
6	Assessment of sibling relationship Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008) Statistics Observations Core assessments

Table 7. The possible assessment tools or methods used by each social worker when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart.

As can be seen from this, all social workers made reference to the Together or Apart? Assessment (Lord & Borthwick, 2008), but aside from this there were a range of different approaches mentioned. This appears to be in line with the literature, which suggests that there is limited guidance as to how social workers should approach these assessments (Henry, 2014). Both SCIE (2004) and NICE (2010) state the importance of assessment when considering how to place a group of siblings, but do not give any clear guidance as to what this assessment should involve. Hence, the variety of approaches used by the social workers interviewed highlights this.

Within the LA, it may be appropriate to develop local guidelines detailing what steps social workers should take in their assessments to inform whether to place siblings together or apart. Again, this would help to promote consistency in approach between different workers.

6.2.3.3 Theme 11: Consideration of guidance, theory and research

Four of the social workers made some reference to following guidance, theory, research or evidence as part of their decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. This suggests that the authors of published information influence their decision-making. Box 9 shows some examples of this.

“...also use research from RIP or SCIE...to evidence, erm, or back up information that you’ve gained...”
“Using the evidence base that’s before me...”
“...which evidence has positive outcomes...”
“I always try and keep it rational, logical and evidence-based.”
[Social Worker 1]

“...those there are factors, erm, that I think are put in the research that we commonly use...”
“...look into other areas of research and social work practice...”
“We’re meant to anyway, we’re meant to try and ensure they grow up with siblings.”
“...if you’ve got all the research in the world...”
“...actually evidence why...”
“...I do use research and I do use theories.”
[Social Worker 2]

“...the law says that we need to keep families together wherever possible...”
“...I got it into my head what the law advises or instructs...”
“...using the law as the final, final kind of arbiter...”
“...Eriksson stages of development...”
“...disinhibited attachment disorder...”
“...pull in other generic theories...”
“...I always go back to the law...”
[Social Worker 3]

“...start with the assumption that they should stay together..”
“...it was just practice, good practice...”
[Social Worker 6]

Box 9. Examples of social workers’ comments relating to Theme 11: Consideration of guidance, theory and research.

It is positive that four of the six social workers interviewed reflected on following research evidence, theory and the available guidance when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings, as this is what is recommended in the literature

by authors such as Hegar (2005), SCIE (2004) and NICE (2010). However, little guidance is given as to what particular theories or research studies social workers should consider when faced with these decisions, and the variety of social workers' responses noted here reflects this. Similarly, the 'evidence' or 'research' that the social workers mentioned during the interviews tended to be only a vague reference, perhaps suggesting that they themselves are unclear on what they should be basing their decisions regarding sibling placement on. It perhaps also reflects purported by Washington (2007) the view that the incorporation of theory into social work practice is minimal.

Within the LA, it may be helpful for social workers to have up-to-date information, perhaps through training sessions, relating to research and guidelines associated with sibling placement. This is something that appears to influence their decision-making, but it is unclear how up-to-date and relevant the research upon which they are basing their decisions is.

6.3 Deductive thematic analysis

As described in the previous chapter, I used deductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify which, if any, of a set of five heuristics commonly cited in research looking at everyday decision-making were evident in the social workers' decision-making whilst considering the scenarios presented in the vignettes, and in their responses to the interview questions. This allowed me to address the fourth research question.

6.3.1 Research question 4: What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

I found evidence for the use of each of the identified heuristics by at least one of the social workers interviewed. However, there was little consistency in social workers' views on their own use of heuristics.

6.3.1.1 Confidence heuristic

From the raw data, it seemed that several of the social workers may have used a 'confidence heuristic' when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart; Social Workers 1, 3, and 5 all appeared to have made a decision based upon the confidence with which that particular option was presented by an advisory individual (Price & Stone, 2004).

For example, Social Worker 1 made reference to seeking advice and support from a senior colleague during the first piece of casework that they had completed that required them to complete a sibling assessment. It seemed that this senior colleague shaped Social Worker 1's thoughts and guided their decision. Social Worker 3 also described a similar approach to their first sibling assessment, and discussed how they were shown a 'best practice example, what I should be aiming for' by the senior colleague.

Social Worker 5 also mentioned seeking out advice from a senior colleague who they described as 'the lead professional in these assessments' (despite this not being his actual role). Social Worker 5 perceived this senior colleague as more confident and

experienced, and described how their view actually completely changed their whole decision. Social Worker 5 explained how they had focused solely on ‘the older boy’s behaviour’ and was suggesting that the sibling group should be separated, whereas the senior colleague pointed out the ‘positives of the relationship’ and actually changed Social Worker 5’s decision regarding their placement.

When the Social Workers expressed a lack of confidence, such as when they had to complete their first sibling assessment and make decisions regarding the placement of the siblings, it seemed that many turned to a senior colleague who had more experience in this area, and were guided through the decision-making process by this more confident individual. This is in line with the study conducted by Price and Stone (2004) who found that participants’ preferences were guided by an advisor who appeared confident, and who was perceived as more knowledgeable than themselves.

6.3.1.2 Familiarity heuristic

The ‘familiarity heuristic’ is used when the decision-maker chooses the option that matches with decisions they have made in the past (McCammon, 2004). Several of the Social Workers alluded to this. For example:

“I guess there’s an element of you’ve made a decision before, you feel more confident the second time round.” [Social Worker 1]

However, Social Worker 1 then went on to reflect that all cases are different and that you cannot always 'base decisions on past experience'. Social Worker 2 expressed similar views and noted that 'that's perhaps typical in all social work, in all the social work that you do... coz you might think 'well I did this last time, let's try this.'

Whilst reading the first vignette, Social Worker 1 reflected on a case that they had been involved in where the siblings had been kept together, although their previous social worker had thought they should be separated. They described how these siblings were 'starting to... form positive relationships'. This experience appeared to influence Social Worker 1's decision-making for the vignettes, as they felt that both sibling groups should be placed together. Perhaps the positive outcomes that they had experienced made them more confident to make the same decision with these fictional cases.

Social Worker 3 felt that they might be influenced by the familiarity heuristic, but described it as 'a trap' and described how each individual case needed careful consideration, with thought given to all available options.

Social Worker 4 felt that they would be influenced by the familiarity heuristic, as they felt it would help their decision-making: 'you know what you're looking for, and, in hindsight, you can sharpen your own perception.' Social Worker 4 also reflected on a previous case when considering the second vignette and made links between the two: '...it's not... too dissimilar than a case I had previously of twins.' Thus, it may be

that their decision (to keep the siblings in the vignette together) was influenced by the decision that they had made in the past regarding the real-life case of twins.

Social Worker 5 said that they had limited experience in carrying out sibling assessments, but felt that perhaps if they had more experience, that their decision-making could be influenced by the familiarity heuristic.

Finally, Social Worker 6 did not think that the familiarity heuristic would influence their decision-making, as they felt that they had made 'different decisions' regarding the placement of siblings in the past.

Although some of the Social Workers responses suggested that they may use the familiarity heuristic in their decision-making, it seems that most recognised that this approach may be inappropriate, as all cases are different and require careful consideration. When the Social Workers came across cases (such as those described in the vignettes) that appeared similar to ones that they had had in the past (such as that described by Social Workers 1 and 4), then it may be more likely that they would be influenced by the familiarity heuristic.

McCammon (2004) studied the use of heuristics by climbers during avalanches, and found that past actions guided behaviour within familiar settings. This relates to the social workers' decision-making, in that they may be influenced by this familiarity heuristic when they are involved in cases that appear comparable, or share similar characteristics, to ones that they have been involved in in the past.

6.3.1.3 Priority heuristic

The 'priority heuristic' occurs when the decision-maker goes through the options and chooses the option that gives the maximum gain (Brandstätter et al., 2006). From the data, there appeared to be little evidence of this heuristic being used in the Social Workers' decision-making. Most of the Social Workers described initial 'feelings' or 'thoughts' when considering the scenarios presented in the vignettes, and did not appear to be going through the different options available and choosing the option that would give maximum gain.

Only Social Worker 2 appeared to consider the different options available in the second vignette. They suggested that the three siblings described should be placed together, but then also said: 'I suppose one thing you'd perhaps be looking at then is whether the little one would be adopted...' Social Worker 2 then went on to say that 'you have to think a bit long-term', perhaps suggesting that they were considering which option would give maximum gain.

It may be that this heuristic was not found in the majority of social workers' decision-making, as when considering whether to place siblings together or apart, there is often no clear best option (Hegar, 2005). Therefore, it may not be clear which option would give 'maximum gain' without further exploration and consideration. This is not possible when making decisions based on the vignettes.

6.3.1.4 Social proof heuristic

The 'social proof heuristic' occurs when the decision-maker selects the option that other people are selecting (McCammon, 2002). Some of the Social Workers disputed the reliance on the social proof heuristic, and when asked directly, they felt that this would not influence their decision-making. For example, Social Worker 1 did not think that he used the 'social proof' heuristic:

“...I can be influenced in the sense that, through detailed discussion, which evidence has positive outcomes and yes, but not someone saying ‘oh, I did it this way – give it a go.’”

Social Worker 1 did not feel that he would select the option that other people were selecting. However, as seen from the inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), it is important to note that all of the social workers described other people whose views they would consider when making a decision regarding the placement of siblings, and whose views would potentially influence their decision. Thus, although Social Worker 1 and others stated explicitly that they did not believe they would be influenced by the social proof heuristic, they may use this heuristic unconsciously, without being aware that they are doing so. It would seem that social workers may be guided by the decisions that other people are making, particularly when they lack confidence or experience in the particular decision-making area.

6.3.1.5 Take-the-best heuristic

Finally, the 'take-the best' heuristic occurs when the decision-maker selects the the most valid option (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999), but if that does not help them decide between the options, moves on to the next most valid option, and so on

(Bröder, 2003; Newell & Shanks, 2003). This heuristic involves making a decision based on one key reason (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999).

There was little evidence of this heuristic being used by the Social Workers during their decision-making in the vignettes. Most Social Workers seemed to consider the positive aspect and negative aspects of the sibling relationship, as well as other factors such as the individual needs of the children and the potentially detrimental effects of separating the siblings. Therefore, their decisions did not seem to be based on one key reason, or the take-the-best heuristic.

When asked explicitly whether they felt they would make a decision based on one key reason, five of the six Social Workers felt that there would be occasions where they would use this 'take-the-best' heuristic. For example, Social Worker 2 felt that this might occur due to the 'quickness' of having to make a decision and the 'lack of information' with 'not having time to dig deeper'. Social Worker 3 also noted that due to 'demands' of the job, they might make a decision regarding the placement of siblings based on one key reason, as did Social Worker 4.

Social Worker 5 described one case that they had been involved in and noted that their decision had initially been based on one key reason: the 'eldest boy's challenging behaviour'. However, they reported that when they had sought advice from a colleague and considered the situation at greater length, their decision changed, and was based on several reasons rather than just one.

Social Worker 6 also described a previous case, where they had become focused on the 'competitiveness' between the siblings. They felt that their decision had been based on this, as this was the one key factor that they kept returning to.

Social Worker 1 felt that they would never base such a decision on one key reason alone due to the 'many factors' that may be involved in the situation. However, he did state that if there was a 'Child Protection' or 'safeguarding' reason, then their decision may be based on this alone. Several other Social Workers noted that there were a number of negative factors such as these, and also including sexual abuse, that would influence their decision and lead to separating the sibling group. Thus, it may be that the take-the-best heuristic would be used when there are negative reasons which the Social Worker would need to focus on to safeguard the children.

These findings relate to the research by Todd and Gigerenzer (1999) who found that the take-the-best heuristic was commonly used when decisions had to be made in situations where time was limited and when particularly pertinent factors (such as the safeguarding factors above) are present.

Within the context of the LA, it may be useful to provide professionals, including social workers and EPs, with basic information regarding heuristics. During this research, it seemed that few people were aware of what heuristics were and their potential to influence human decision-making. By raising awareness of these, it may lead to greater use of evidence-based decision-making and consideration of alternative views, rather than decisions based solely on the use of mental shortcuts.

However, the use of heuristics has been associated with high quality decision-making (Payne & Bettman, 2004), so it would not be appropriate to suggest that professionals should not rely on these when faced with making a decision.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has outlined the findings from the present research study in relation to the four research questions, highlighting pertinent extracts from the raw data and linking it to the research literature presented in Chapters 2-4 of this Volume. The methodological limitations, along with implications for the practice of both social workers and educational psychologists when involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings in foster care or for adoption, will be considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Introduction

The overarching aim of this research study was to use an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004; Simon, 1990; Simon, 1955) to explore the decision-making of social workers within one Local Authority (LA) when they are considering whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or foster care placements. The previous chapters have explored the relevant literature published to date regarding, the methods used to collect and analyse the data, and the findings of the research. The methods have helped me to meet the aim of this study, and also to answer the four research questions.

This concluding chapter will explore each of the research questions in turn, how the findings relate to the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) explore the methodological limitations of the research and the implications for practice of both social workers and educational psychologists. Directions for future research will also be considered.

7.2 Answering the research questions

This section considers each research question in turn, and addresses how the findings from the inductive and deductive thematic analyses (Boyatzis, 1998) presented in Chapter 6 answer these.

7.2.1 Research question 1: What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?

The findings suggest that there were a number of key pieces of information that the social workers attended to when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings.

All of the participants referred to particular pieces of information within the two vignettes that they based their decision on and some similarities were found across all six social workers' with regards to which information they paid particular attention to. All of the social workers referred to the individual needs of the children within the sibling group and the positive aspects of the sibling relationship. Most of the social workers also paid attention to the negative aspects of the sibling relationship described and some commented on the potentially detrimental effects of separation. Similarly, their responses to the interview questions suggested that similar themes were evident when they made decisions regarding the placement of siblings, not just in the context of the vignettes.

It would seem that most of the social workers approached each group of siblings with the idea that they should be placed together. This may have been because of the guidance, which suggests that this should be the starting point (HM Government, 2000) or it may have been due to their personal beliefs regarding the importance of the sibling relationship. Nevertheless, it would seem that social workers pay particular attention to the positive aspects of the siblings' relationships and how these can be built upon, alongside the individual needs of each of the children. Other

factors, such as the ages of the children, or relationships with their carers, received little attention. The importance of the sibling relationship was recognised by two of the social workers, who paid attention to the potentially detrimental effects of separating a group of siblings.

Most of the social workers also considered the negative aspects of the siblings' relationships. However, they tended to reflect on what support the children could receive to address these negatives. It seemed that their decisions would only be based upon these negative factors if they were safeguarding issues, such as sexual abuse.

7.2.2 Research question 2: What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?

The findings suggested that the social workers faced a number of constraints when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or foster care placements. All of the social workers recognised a number of constraints, including constraints at an individual and at a systemic level. At the individual level, most of the social worker reflected on their own lack of experience in making decisions in this area, as well as the constraining effect of their own emotions and personal beliefs which often led them to perceive making the decision as a difficult process. Their personal experiences of the sibling relationship, such as with their own siblings or with their own children, also acted as a constraining factor in that it appeared to lead them towards keeping siblings together and influenced their personal values regarding siblings. None of the social workers interviewed in the present study

described their own experiences as a sibling as negative; it would be interesting to discover whether a social worker that had experienced a negative relationship with their own sibling would be more likely to separate siblings.

At a systemic level, most of the social workers commented on the lack of training regarding assessing sibling relationships, and felt that this constrained their decision-making, as they did not always know where to start in the assessment process. Other constraints at a systemic level included the pressures of having a high number of cases and an increasing workload, which was also affected by the strict timescales within which decisions regarding the placement of siblings often need to be made. Paperwork and bureaucracy were also mentioned as potential constraints, along with the lack of available placements, particularly for large sibling groups, which has been commented on in the literature as a national issue (DfE, 2012b).

7.2.3 Research question 3: Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?

The findings illustrated that several people may influence a social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. For example, the social workers mentioned the wishes and feelings of the children themselves, their carers, their biological parents, and a range of other professionals including other social care colleagues, health professionals, staff in schools, family support workers who often supervise the contact between siblings and parents, and so on.

These findings are in line with the guidance that promotes a multi-agency approach to decision-making, where the views of a range of people involved with a particular sibling group should be considered (Lord & Borthwick, 2008).

It was found that some professionals' views may hold more weight than others. For example, several of the social workers referred to seeking support and advice from their line manager or a senior colleague who they perceived as more experienced in the area of sibling assessment and decision-making regarding their placement. This would suggest that some of the views of others are more significant than others. Only one social worker referred to seeking the views of a psychologist, whereas all referred to the importance of the views of the children and their current carers, as well as their social care colleagues.

The social workers also noted the importance of assessment when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart. As part of the assessment process, all of the social workers mentioned at least one tool that they would use that would involve gathering the views of other individuals. This suggests that social workers are keen to gain the views of other significant people within the children's lives and tend to take this into account when making decisions regarding their placement.

The social workers also appeared to be influenced by the authors of published guidance, theory and research related to this area. This tended to guide them through the assessment and decision-making process.

7.2.4 Research question 4: What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

The findings suggested that the social workers may have relied on a number of heuristics when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings. There was evidence to suggest that some of the social workers relied on the confidence heuristic (Price & Stone, 2004) by allowing their decision to be guided by another individual who was perceived as more confident, and perhaps competent, in the decision-making area.

The familiarity heuristic (McCammon, 2004) may also influence a social worker's decision-making. The findings showed that all of the social workers reflected on past cases that they had been involved in, and several made links between their past cases and the cases described in the vignettes. This heuristic may be used by social workers when they are faced with making a decision regarding a group of siblings who share similar characteristics to another sibling group that they have worked with in the past.

All of the social workers made reference to gathering and considering the views of others as part of the decision-making process. This suggests that they are using the social proof heuristic, where they make a decision based upon the decisions that other people are making (McCammon, 2002).

Due to the complex nature of the decision regarding the placement of siblings, there was little evidence that suggested the social workers used the take-the-best heuristic,

where they based their decision on one key 'best' reason (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1999). However, when factors such as sexual abuse, reliving traumatic events and scapegoating were evident in the sibling relationship, social workers may be more likely to base their decision on this one key reason, and would decide to separate the siblings. It may be that when one extremely negative factor, such as these, is evident, the social worker is more likely to rely on the take-the-best heuristic.

7.2.4.1 Affect heuristic

One heuristic that the social workers appeared to rely on that I had not identified as one to explore through the deductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was the affect heuristic. This heuristic involves selecting an option based on the decision-maker's feelings (Peters & Slovic, 1996). All of the social workers interviewed referred to the emotional impact of the decision-making when considering whether to place siblings together or apart, and so may have based their decision upon these feelings. Therefore, a key, but perhaps unexpected, finding was that the social workers may rely on the affect heuristic (Peters & Slovic, 1996) to aid their decision-making in this area.

7.3 Links to the Information Processing Approach

As the aim of this research was to explore social workers' decision-making with an Information Processing Approach framework (Payne & Bettman, 2004), it is important to consider how the findings and answers to the research questions relate to this.

A detailed description of the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) can be found in Chapter 4 of this Volume. Table 8 below highlights the key elements of this approach and how the findings of this study relate to these.

Key element	Findings from present study
Humans are highly selective about what information they pay attention to when making decisions.	Section 7.2.1 shows the particular pieces of information that social workers attended to when making decisions.
Constraints in the environment influence human decision-making.	Section 7.2.2 highlights the constraints that influenced the social workers' decision-making.
Human decision-making is influenced by the environment, including the influence of other people.	Section 7.2.3 illustrates the range of other people that influenced the decisions made by the social workers.
Humans have limited capacity to make decisions and often rely on heuristics to aid their decision-making, particularly when making complex decisions.	Section 7.2.4 shows some of the heuristics that social workers relied on when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings, which can be considered a complex decision.

Table 8. Key elements of the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) and links with the findings of the present study.

The findings from the present study support the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) as a good explanation of how social workers make decisions regarding the placement of siblings. Research has shown that humans are selective about what information they pay attention to when making decisions, and the findings of the present study also reflects this. For example, Payne and Bettman (2004) suggest that humans' attention is often unconsciously directed to certain pieces of information, particularly when faced with complex decisions, due to our limited attentional capacity. The social workers did show selective attention in the present study; for example, they did tend to focus on particular aspects of the sibling relationship in the vignettes when making decisions, and also when responding to the interview questions. However, it is unclear from the present study whether this was

an 'unconscious' process; it seemed that the social workers may have been purposefully selecting which pieces of the information to focus on.

The present study has also highlighted a range of constraints that influenced the social workers' decision-making. This also relates to previous studies that have utilised an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004). For example, the present study found that the social workers' own emotions affected their decision-making. Luce, Payne and Bettman (2000) asked participants to make a choice between two alternatives in an experimental setting, and found that humans often make decisions that help them to avoid experiencing negative emotions. The findings from the present study appear to support this assertion in relation to real-life decision-making. Payne and Bettman (2004) also report that human decision-making is bounded by constraints in the environment. The findings of the present study, relating to systemic constraints that influenced the social workers' decision-making, are in line with previous research that have identified similar constraints, such as paperwork, bureaucracy and high workloads (Randall et al., 2000).

Both the present study and previous research from a wide range of disciplines have suggested that other people can influence an individual's decision-making in a variety of different contexts. For example, previous research has suggested that Wall Street analysts are influenced by other people (Rao, Greve & Davis, 2001); individuals also make decisions based on what other people are doing in recreational avalanche accidents (McCammon, 2002); and the influence of others is also evident in a study of gambling habits in Las Vegas (Griskevicius et al., 2009). Thus, the findings from

the present study support the notion that humans are influenced by other people when making decisions, and also provides support for the social proof heuristic (McCammon, 2002).

The findings from the present study suggest that social workers may rely on a range of heuristics to aid their decision-making. This has also been illustrated in a range of other studies that have explored complex decision-making. For example, Newell and Shanks (2003) demonstrated in an experimental design study that individuals make use of the take-the-best heuristic, particularly the cost of information was high. This related to the present study, where social workers may have relied on the take-the-best heuristic when there were particularly negative factors in a sibling relationship, such as where there was a safeguarding concern.

However, evidence of one of the heuristics (the priority heuristic) was not found within the present study. This heuristic involves the decision-maker going through the options and choosing the option that gives the maximum gain (Brandstätter et al., 2006). Within the present study, it may be that the decision – whether to place siblings together or apart – has no option that would clearly give ‘maximum gain’. The research regarding outcomes for siblings placed together compared with those placed apart is mixed (Hegar, 2005), suggesting that this is a complex area for which there is often no simple answer. This could explain why the use of the priority heuristic in decision-making was not supported in this study.

In summary, it seems that social workers' decision-making is influenced by constraints, both in their own capacity and in the environment, by other people and by which particular pieces of information they pay attention to. Social workers may also rely on heuristics, or simplification mechanisms, to aid their decision-making, particularly when under pressure due to restricted timescales for the decision to be made and their often high workload.

7.4 Reflections on the methodology

The present research study has value, as the review of the research literature (in Chapters 2-4 of this Volume) suggests that there have been no other studies exploring social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings using and Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004).

This section offers reflections on the research process and the methodology used to address the research aims and questions.

7.4.1 Sample

The size of the sample of social workers involved in this research study was small. I had hoped for a larger sample of around eight to ten social workers, but unfortunately, only seven social workers volunteered and one was unable to take part, leaving only six social workers as the sample. However, I do not feel that this is a significant limitation of the study due to the rich data collected through the interview process. A larger sample would have provided more data, but the analysis of a larger data set would likely be less in-depth and rich due to the sheer amount of

information that would have had to be considered. Similarly, within a case study design, sample size is not a key issue, provided that the sample chosen are representative of the population that I wished to study (i.e. the social workers within the LA) (Thomas, 2011).

Due to small sample size in the present study, it is important to consider the impact of sample bias (Bryman, 2008). It may be that the sample was not truly representative of the population of social workers within the LA. This may be due to issues with recruitment. It is unclear why these six social workers volunteered to take part, whilst others did not volunteer. It could be that these six held particularly strong or extreme views, or a particular interest, regarding sibling assessments and whether siblings should be placed together or apart. Therefore, their views may not be truly representative of all social workers within the LA.

However, as I was interested in exploring the individual decision-making of social workers within this particular LA, the findings of this study still have utility. There were some similarities in response of the social workers, allowing for some tentative generalisation. This study provides insight into the decision-making processes of social workers employed within this LA, but due to the small scale nature of the case study, we must be careful about generalising the findings beyond this context (Thomas, 2011). It may be that the findings would not be replicated if the study were carried out with a wider population of social workers from different local authorities due to the importance of context. Therefore, further research outside of this LA would be required to explore the generalisability and transferability of these findings.

However, the present research study and its findings provide information regarding which factors may influence individual social workers' decision-making. As Robson (2002) notes, carrying out real world research can mean that 'the requirements for representative sampling are very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil' (p.266).

7.4.2 Data collection

Chapter 5 contains further detail and critique regarding my decision to use semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. I believe that there was sound rationale behind selecting this particular method, as it allowed me to explore the research aims and answer the research questions.

However, several limitations regarding this approach to data collection require consideration. Runswick-Cole (2011) notes that 'positionality' is a key issue in interviewing. Although I did not know any of the participants involved in this research study, it is important to consider my position as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) and how this may have affected the interview process. I do not think that my role as a TEP would have led to a power imbalance in the interview process; within the LA, social workers and educational psychologists are increasingly engaging in joint casework and one role is not viewed as more 'senior' to the other. However, I was not aware of how each social worker perceived educational psychologists as a professional group and how aware they were of what the role entails. It may be that the social workers perceive educational psychologists as keen to promote inclusion and as valuing assessment, meaning that they were more likely to talk about keeping

siblings together and discussing how they would approach assessment. There may have been some element of social desirability bias in their responses.

It is also not clear to what extent my comments and non-verbal responses to their answers influenced the interview process. I tried to remain impartial and attempted to encourage the social workers to be open and honest in their responses, by smiling and nodding as they spoke. However, it is possible that I may have unconsciously influenced their responses.

As part of the interview schedule, the social workers were required to read through two vignettes and 'think aloud'. This particular method may be considered controversial, as it has been more commonly used in fields 'accustomed to quantitative data' (p.367) such as computer interaction and software design (Robson, 2002). However, I would argue that the use of vignettes in the present study allowed for greater insight and understanding of the social workers' decision-making than simply asking them to tell me about it would have provided.

A final consideration regarding the data collection methods is whether it is possible to identify the use of heuristics in decision-making, as this is generally considered to be an unconscious process (Payne & Bettman, 2004). As Todd and Gigerenzer (1999) noted, as heuristics tend to be an unconscious process, how do we know if we are using them? Simply asking the social workers whether they were using a particular heuristic may not have elicited an accurate answer. It would be hoped that the use of vignettes eliminated this to some extent. Finally, although I have attempted to define

which heuristics the social workers used during the decision-making process, it is not possible to be completely certain that this is the case. There are many heuristics that have been defined and discussed in the research literature, some of which have achieved more attention than others, but it is not possible to determine precisely which heuristics a person may be unconsciously relying upon when making a decision (Todd & Gigerenzer, 1999).

7.4.3 Analysis

It is possible that my own beliefs led to biases in the data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). However, I tried to be explicit and transparent when describing and conducting the process of data analysis. Once the codes had been defined, I tried to ensure that I used them consistently when analysing the raw data to ensure reliability. I also checked my coding and re-read the interview transcripts several times to ensure that I had not missed any 'codable moments' (Boyatzis 1998). A colleague was asked to code independently one of the interviews and this indicated consistency and reliability in my analysis.

I also attempted to suspend my own judgments during the data analysis, particularly during the inductive stage where I attempted to stick as closely as possible to the raw data and what it said. Thus, although there is always the possibility for biases in any form of qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2008), I was always aware of this potential and implemented strategies to try and reduce the likelihood of these biases occurring.

7.4.4 Context

A final area to consider when exploring the limitations of this study is the context in which it took place. This case study took place with six social workers in one LA. It may be that particular aspects of this LA and the context in which the study occurred influenced the findings of this study.

Within the teams of social workers in this LA there is a hierarchical structure, with social work managers, consultant social workers and senior practitioner social workers positioned above 'main grade' social workers. When considering the influence of the views of others on the social workers' decision-making, it is important to reflect on the impact that this hierarchical structure may have had. For example, if social workers sought the views or opinions of a more senior social work colleague, it may be that they felt inclined to make a decision in line with this colleague's guidance due to their seniority.

It is important to also consider that social workers work within a culture of 'blame' and high accountability for their actions (Randall et al., 2000). Thus, when making complex decisions, such as those regarding the placement of siblings, it is likely that social workers would want robust evidence and support from their senior colleagues. Within this context, it seems unlikely that a social worker would challenge the views of their more senior colleagues, or indeed the views of other influential individuals, as they may then be leaving themselves solely accountable if something goes 'wrong' for the group of siblings.

7.4.5 Reflexivity

As noted in Chapter 5 of this Volume, Mays and Pope (2000) suggest that in qualitative research the researcher should address issues of reflexivity ('how the researcher and research process have shaped the collected data', p. 51). Throughout the research, I considered my role as part of the construction of knowledge (Haynes, 2012). As I am employed by the LA in which the social workers were also employed, I was mindful of the potential impact that this might have had; for example, the social workers may have felt uncomfortable discussing their decision-making processes or the constraints they faced, as they may have thought that I would share any negative information with senior staff or be critical of their practice. I tried to reduce the impact of this by assuring social workers of their anonymity, the confidentiality of the interview, and also by adopting a non-judgmental approach during the interviews, accepting their thoughts and opinions without comment or criticism.

I also acknowledged my own beliefs regarding the placement of siblings. As I have a close relationship with my twin brother, I recognised that I valued the sibling relationship, and if questioned would state that I feel siblings should be kept together whenever possible. However, due to my exploration of the research literature, I realise that this is not always practical and that there are occasions when siblings may benefit from being separated (Lord & Borthwick, 2008). This hopefully meant that my own personal views were balanced by evidence from the research literature, and that the potential for biases in my response to the data collection and analysis were reduced.

7.5 Implications for practice within the LA

The findings of this research study have clear implications for the practice of social workers and educational psychologists within this LA, working not only in the area of sibling assessment and placement, but in the area of complex decision-making as a whole.

The findings from the first research question suggested that the social workers were selective about what pieces of information they attended to when faced with a decision regarding the placement of siblings. This has implications for their practice, as important elements may be missed if they do not attend to all of the information available to them. For example, whilst a social worker may pay particular attention to the positive aspects of a sibling relationship, other more negative aspects may be overlooked. As a result, if the social workers do not attend to all of the information, then they may make a decision that is not necessarily in the best interests of the children within the sibling group. However, it could be argued that it would be impossible for the social workers to pay equal attention to all of the vast range of information available to them, and process all of this during their decision-making, due to constraints of the human mind (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Therefore it may be useful to raise social workers' awareness of the types of information that they may be more likely to attend to, whilst also encouraging them to look outside of this key information that has been highlighted in the present study. EPs may be well-positioned within the LA to offer support in this area, perhaps through delivering 'awareness raising' training sessions, highlighting humans' selective attention when making complex decisions and explaining psychological theories of decision-making.

Findings from the second research question and from the review of the literature suggested that the social workers within this LA faced a number of challenges or constraints when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings for adoption or in foster care. It is hoped that the findings from the present research study would provide the social workers with a greater understanding of the complex nature of human decision-making and the factors that may influence them. With this awareness, it may be that social workers can reflect more effectively on their decision-making, and note where their own emotions, experiences or beliefs, or environmental constraints, may be having an influence. With greater self-awareness, social workers may be more transparent and consistent in their decision-making. Within this LA, EPs have recently become involved in leading reflective case discussions with small groups of social workers. This may provide EPs with an ideal opportunity to encourage the social workers to be more reflective in their practice and consider the impact of some of these constraints, with a particular focus on the emotional and personal impact of this area of work.

When considering the impact of systemic constraints on decision-making, the present study highlights possible implications for reducing caseloads and lengthening timescales for social workers involved in this area of work. However, these changes to practice may be more difficult to implement in light of recent financial cuts to the LA and the legal nature of timescales. However, if social workers are to have sufficient time and resources to carry out quality assessments leading to robust and defensible decisions, then these implications require consideration. In this LA, there are currently plans to try and reduce the number of cases open to social workers and

instead support families through a multi-agency, 'early help' model, with an emphasis on earlier intervention and targeted family work before cases escalate to social care. EPs play a key role in this new model of working. Therefore, if EPs can support high quality early intervention work within the multi-agency context, it would be hoped that the pressure of high caseloads for social workers would be reduced, perhaps leading to more time and capacity for more robust decision-making regarding the placement of siblings in foster care and adoptive placements.

The findings from the third research question suggested that the social workers considered the views of a range of other people during the decision-making process. This has implications for their practice as it is important that they use their own professional judgment to make decisions rather than being solely guided by other people. In particular, all of the social workers interviewed in the present study made reference to seeking advice and support from a senior colleague; this is positive in cases where the social workers have had limited experience of decision-making in this area. However, this senior social worker had not necessarily met the siblings in question; therefore, emphasis should be placed on increasing social workers' confidence and capacity to make these decisions independently to some extent. Within the LA, EPs and social workers are increasingly being asked to work together to improve outcomes for children and families. Thus, EPs may be well-placed to provide support and advice for social workers who are faced with these complex decisions, as well as providing their own views on the decision that needs to be made.

These findings also raise the question of who social workers would listen to in situations where they have gathered the views from a range of people and there are conflicting views regarding how the siblings should be placed. The guidance available does suggest that part of the assessment process should involve the social workers gathering the views of key people, including the children and their carers (Lord & Borthwick, 2008); it is positive that all of the social workers interviewed here were doing so, and the importance of this should be noted in their practice regarding decision-making in this particular area. However, it may be important to consider whether all of the advice from other people would be listened to, and whether more weight should be placed on the views of one person over another. Within the LA, EPs may well be suited to supporting social work colleagues in gaining the views of others through their consultation skills, but also particularly with accessing the voice of the children within the sibling group. Harding and Atkinson (2009) note that EPs are 'well placed to ensure that children's views are both elicited in a neutral way and included in plans being proposed for them' (p.126).

The fourth research question suggested that the social workers may rely on a range of heuristics during the decision-making process. This may be positive, as research is beginning to emerge that suggests that the use of heuristics can lead to positive outcomes in complex decision situations (e.g. Dijksterhuis, 2004; Hardman, 2009). However, Payne and Bettman (2004) noted that the use of heuristics led to 'satisfactory solutions'. This may have implications for the practice of social workers in this particular area of decision-making, as only 'satisfactory' outcomes may be less than desirable in relation to children and sibling groups. It would be difficult to

prevent social workers from using heuristics during their decision-making, as they tend to be unconscious and appear to be part of all humans' decision-making (Payne & Bettman, 2004). However, it may be beneficial to offer training to the social workers to raise their awareness of heuristics and their impact on human decision-making, so that they may become more conscious of their own use of these and the impact that they can have on their decision-making. This could be a key role for the EPs within the LA.

One key issue which this research study has highlighted is the lack of training that social workers within this LA reported that they had received regarding the assessment of sibling relationships. This is something that all of the social workers interviewed drew attention to, and all reflected that they would welcome additional training. Most described how they had 'trained themselves' through seeking the advice and support of a more experienced colleague. However, it may be appropriate for the British Association of Adoption and Fostering, the Social Care Institute of Excellence, or other relevant professional bodies to recognise this issue and work closely with training providers to ensure that social workers receive training regarding how to assess sibling relationships, what would be considered a 'normal' sibling relationships and how best to support the vulnerable groups of siblings that enter the care system. EPs may have a wider knowledge of relevant psychological theories relating to siblings, such as attachment, social development, antisocial and prosocial behaviour and mental health than their social work colleagues, and so may be well placed to offer additional training and guidance on these areas for the social workers in this LA.

Another issue raised by this study was the lack of consistency in approaches to assessing siblings and their relationships. This appears due to a lack of clear guidance in this area and a lack of resources for carrying out these assessments. Although the law in the UK states that siblings should be kept together unless this is not in their best interests (HM Government, 1989), a review of the literature highlighted the lack of guidance as to how social workers should approach the decision-making process. Aside from Lord and Borthwick (2008), there appears to be no systematic or step-by-step guidance as to how social workers should proceed when faced with this decision. It would not be appropriate for these complex decisions to be made using a 'checklist' approach, but further guidance or recommended resources that could be consistently used by all social workers in the LA would perhaps improve their practice in this area. Due to the findings of this study, it may be appropriate for social workers and EPs in the LA to work collaboratively to develop such a set of guidelines for use within their service.

The present findings also have relevance to the decision-making of EPs within the LA. EPs are also required to engage in assessment and complex decision-making, such as deciding whether a child or young person would be best placed within a mainstream school or within a more specialist educational provision. It is likely that EPs decision-making is similarly affected by the factors that this study has shown affect social workers' decision-making, and those outlined by the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Therefore, it will be important for me to share my findings with the EP service to allow opportunities for reflection and discussion regarding our own decision-making.

7.6 Directions for future research

The literature review and findings from the present study have highlighted a number of directions for future research. It is not within the scope of this Volume to comment on these in detail, but future research could explore:

- The utility of the existing resources available for social workers to use when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoptive or foster care placements, such as Lord and Borthwick (2008). At present, this particular resource may be useful for social workers, but there is no evidence base to suggest that its use leads to better decision-making or more positive outcomes for the siblings involved.
- Social workers' decision-making in other areas of practice, such as when deciding whether to remove children from their parents' care and place them into the care of the LA. It would be interesting to explore whether the factors influencing their decision-making were similar to those described in the present study.
- EPs decision-making, particularly in complex areas such as regarding the best educational placement for a child or young person. It would be interesting to investigate whether EPs are influenced by similar factors as social workers, or whether there is a difference in their approach. For example, the particular training of EPs may promote more reflective practice or greater self-awareness in decision-making, and EPs may have a greater understanding of cognitive psychology and factors that influence the human mind.

- The views of specialist EPs working in Looked After Children's Teams by exploring their contributions to the decision-making process regarding the placement of siblings.

7.7 Final comment

This research study has met the aim of exploring social workers' decision-making within one LA, using the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoptive or foster care placements. The findings have highlighted a number of factors that influence social workers' decision-making, including what information they are likely to pay attention to, what constraints they might face, which other people can influence them and what heuristics they might use during the decision-making process.

APPENDIX 1

Participant Information Sheet

Study title

Together or apart? An analysis of Social Workers' decision-making when considering the placement of siblings for adoption or long-term foster care.

The study

Thank you very much for showing an interest in taking part in this study.

It is important for you to understand why the study is being conducted and what it will involve. This information sheet provides this additional information.

If, after reading it, you still have questions, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher (Rebecca Sharpe, Trainee Educational Psychologist).

Why is the study being carried out?

This study is being conducted by Rebecca Sharpe (Trainee Educational Psychologist). As part of the requirements of her doctoral training at the University of Birmingham, she is required to carry out an original research study.

The research has ethical approval from the University of Birmingham and the Local Authority.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore social workers' decision-making when considering whether to place siblings together or apart for long-term foster care or adoption. The researcher will be using a psychological framework to look at this decision making: an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004).

What are the potential benefits of the study?

By examining the decision-making processes involved from a psychological perspective, the researcher may be able to offer further insight into the key pieces of information that social workers actually use and how they make their decisions. The researcher also hopes that the findings will lead to greater awareness of the complex nature of decision-making under these circumstances.

This exploration of their decision-making and the findings from the research may lead to recommendations for training and improving the quality of decisions and ideas for processes and guidelines that would constitute 'good practice' within the Local Authority.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

You will meet with the researcher for approximately 40 minutes to take part in a semi-structured interview. You will be asked questions regarding how you make decisions in situations regarding the placement of siblings.

The interviews will be recorded so that the researcher can transcribe and analyse the information you give.

Will my responses be confidential and anonymous?

Confidentiality will be maintained in line with Section 5 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). Your name will not be included on your questionnaire/linked to your interview.

Each interview will be allocated a number, which only the researcher and yourself will know is linked to you. Data will not be shared with anyone (aside from the researcher) in its raw form. The transcripts, recordings and questionnaires will be kept in a secure filing cabinet in a locked LA office. Electronic data (the recordings) will be stored on a password protected, encrypted laptop. The data will be stored for 10 years following completion of the research as is the policy for all personal data within the LA; after this time it will be destroyed.

No information about what you have said during the interview will be passed on to anybody else, including your managers. This is to ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

During the interviews, you may wish to discuss a particular case that you have been involved in and had to make decisions about. If you wish to do this, please only use first names of the children or other people involved and give no identifying features such as location, dates of birth, and so on.

The first names of any children or other people discussed will be removed from the transcript and replaced by an initial (e.g. Rose will become 'R').

Are there any risks to taking part?

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may be asked to reflect on information of a sensitive or emotional nature. Further support will be available to you if necessary.

Can I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw from the study at any time within six months from the date of the interview. If, after taking part, you decide that you do not want to be part of the study, please contact the researcher via email or telephone (details below) and your data will be destroyed.

After this six month period, it may be more difficult for you to withdraw your data from the study, as it is likely to have been analysed and written up by the researcher for her thesis. You may contact the researcher to discuss this, but withdrawal might not be possible at this stage.

During the interview, if you wish to withdraw a particular comment or answer to a question, this will be noted and this section of the interview will not be transcribed.

What will happen after I have taken part?

Once the research has been completed, the findings will be presented to the key stakeholders of the research (the Head of the LAC Team and the Educational Psychology Service) and all of the participants will be given the opportunity to attend this presentation.

All of the findings will be presented anonymously. No comments will be linked to a particular social worker.

Appropriate debriefing will be offered in line with Section 8 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). If interested, the participants will also have the ability to access the complete Doctoral Thesis held by the University Learning Centre if they wish to.

Thank you for reading this information. Please keep this sheet for your own information.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign and complete the accompanying consent form and return it to the researcher.

Researcher: Rebecca Sharpe

Trainee Educational Psychologist

(Contact details)

(Email address)

If you have any concerns or additional questions about the study and/or the researcher, please contact the researcher's supervisor:

Supervisor: Nick Bozic

Academic & Professional Tutor

(Contact details)

APPENDIX 2

Vignettes

Vignette 1

This assessment examines the relationship between Jane and Lennie Coulson who are currently placed *together* in foster care. They have been in this placement for approximately a year. The care plan of the local authority is for the children to be placed in long term foster care.

Should Jane and Lennie be placed together or apart in this long term placement?

Jane and Lennie currently attend the same primary school. There is a two year age gap between the children, Jane being the eldest.

The two children have a challenging relationship with each other. Jane is able to engage in positive behaviour towards her brother, but Lennie finds it difficult to reciprocate.

There is little evidence of sharing in respect of play, jokes, and secrets. Jane and Lennie enjoy singing together, often signing songs that they have learnt in school.

Lennie can be intensely attention seeking, whilst Jane is happy to play on her own. Jane is very inquisitive and has lots of interests in activities like sewing, music, and origami whilst Lennie prefers adult engagement at all times and finds it difficult to share or play with Jane unless under close supervision from an adult.

The children do not have any pride in each other. They are mutually critical of each other - neither offers any praise towards, or helps, each other.

Prior to entering foster care, Lennie had been 'parented' by Jane. Their current foster carer reports that Jane mirrored her mother's parenting style by nearly always giving into Lennie's demands and remaining very loyal to him. For example, she used feed him and help him in the bath.

When asked, Jane says she '*hates*' her brother. Jane says he '*shows me up in front of my friends at school – he goes round saying that I have a boyfriend which I haven't – he also kicks me and hits me*'. When asked what she likes about Lennie, Jane says, '*Nothing*'. Jane says, '*I am there for him when he cries*'. Jane says that Lennie is not there for her.

Vignette 2

This assessment examines the relationship between Claire, Katie and Alice Smith who are currently placed *together* in temporary foster care. They have been in this placement for approximately six months. The care plan of the local authority is for the children to be placed in long term foster care.

Should Claire, Katie and Alice be placed together or apart in this long term placement?

Claire and Katie currently attend the same primary school. There is a one year age gap between them, with Claire being the eldest. Alice is the youngest child, and attends a local Nursery.

The three children have strong emotional bonds with each other. They appear to play well together and enjoy each others' company.

The two older girls frequently play imaginative games together, such as pretending to be teachers or playing in their Wendy house. They also try to involve Alice in their play, often as the 'baby'. Alice appears to enjoy this type of play, although can lose interest quickly and will wander off, leading to the two older girls becoming a little impatient.

The two older girls rarely play independently at home. At school, they will often play together on the playground, often excluding other children from their games. They do not have a friendship group at school and have been aggressive towards other children when they have tried to join in their games.

The foster carer reports that the two older girls are very protective and loving towards one another. They will often sleep in the same bed if one of them wakes in the night; they provide comfort for each other. Claire and Katie are also very loving towards Alice and will comfort her if she is upset. They also enjoy looking after her, and enjoy feeding her and giving her a bath.

The foster carer has tried to encourage the girls to develop separate interests. However, this has proved difficult due to the girls' closeness in age and desire to be together for the majority of the time.

All three girls enjoy the company of adults and have developed a strong bond with their current foster carer. They like to engage her in their games and can tolerate her sharing her attention between them.

APPENDIX 3

Interview schedule

- 1) Have you been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings for adoption or long-term foster care?

- 2) I'm now going to give you two fictional scenarios to look at. While reading these in turn, I would like you to imagine that you have been given this as a case and you have been asked to think about whether the siblings should be placed together or apart. As you are reading, I would like you to 'think aloud' and tell me your initial thoughts. When you have finished each scenario, I would like you to tell me what your decision would be based on the information in the scenario.

Vignette 1 (presented to participant)

Vignette 2 (presented to participant)

- 3) I'm now going to ask you some questions. Have you ever received any training specifically related to sibling assessment?

- 4) Do you use any particular assessment tools when you are faced with these decisions?

- 5) What factors do you consider to be important when making these kinds of decisions regarding the placement of siblings?

- 6) What other people, if any, would influence your decision-making?

- 7) What do you perceive as making the decision-making process more difficult?

- 8) Evidence from research suggests that people are more likely to make a particular decision if they have made that decision before. Do you agree with this, and do you think that this might influence your decision-making?

- 9) Research also suggests that people are more likely to make a decision if other people are making similar or the same decisions. Do you agree with this, and do you think that this might influence your decision-making?
- 10) Research also suggests that people who are required to make a decision quickly and efficiently often make decisions based on one key reason alone. Do you agree with this, and do you think that this might influence your decision-making?
- 11) The last three questions relate to what we call in psychology, 'heuristics'. Heuristics are simplification mechanisms or mental shortcuts that research has shown help us make decisions. Can you think of any other heuristics or mental shortcuts that might apply to your decision-making?
- 12) Is there anything else you would like to add that you haven't said about your decision-making?

APPENDIX 4

Recruitment advertisement

(sent via email)

Dear Social Worker,

You have been identified, hopefully correctly, as a social worker who has conducted or has been involved with assessment and decision-making in regard to placing siblings either together or apart for either adoption or long-term foster care during the last six months.

I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to be interviewed as part of a research project looking at the decision-making processes involved in these situations? The interviews will be conducted by Rebecca Sharpe (Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Birmingham, currently working within the Local Authority).

The interviews will take place on _____ at _____ and will last approximately 45 minutes. If this date is not convenient, but you still wish to take part, additional arrangements can be made.

I am interested in looking at how these decisions are made, using a psychological theoretical framework. The research has ethical approval from the University of Birmingham. Further details of the study can be provided to those wishing to participate.

Please let me know if you would be interested in taking part.

Many thanks,

Rebecca Sharpe

Trainee Educational Psychologist

(My contact details within the Local Authority will also be included.)

APPENDIX 5

Consent form

Please read the following statements and tick if you agree:

- ☐ I have read the Participant Information Sheet and understand its contents.
- ☐ I understand that participation in this study is voluntary.
- ☐ I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time within six months from the date of the interview.
- ☐ I understand that my responses will be confidential and anonymous.

- ☐ **I wish to take part in this study.**

Signed: _____

Date: _____

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher:

Rebecca Sharpe

Trainee Educational Psychologist

(Contact telephone number and email address)

If you have any concerns or additional questions about the study and/or the researcher, please contact the researcher's supervisor:

Supervisor: Nick Bozic

Academic & Professional Tutor

(Contact details)

APPENDIX 6

Application for ethical review

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW	OFFICE USE ONLY: Application No: Date Received:
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1. TITLE OF PROJECT

Together or apart? An analysis of Social Workers' decision-making when considering the placement of siblings for adoption or long-term foster care.

2. THIS PROJECT IS:

University of Birmingham Staff Research project ☐

University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project ☒

Other ☐ (Please specify):

3. INVESTIGATORS

a) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS OR SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)

Name: Title / first name / family name	Nick Bozic
Highest qualification & position	MEd (Ed Psych) – Academic and Professional
School/Department	School of Education
Telephone:	
Email address:	

Name: Title / first name / family name	
Highest qualification & position held:	
School/Department	
Telephone:	
Email address:	

b) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF ANY CO-INVESTIGATORS OR CO-SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)

Name: Title / first name / family name	
Highest qualification & position held:	
School/Department	
Telephone:	
Email address:	

c) In the case of PGR student projects, please give details of the student

Name of	Rebecca Sharpe	Student No:	
Course of study:	App Ed & Child Psy	Email	
Principal	Nick Bozic		

Name of student:		Student No:	
Course of study:		Email	
Principal			

4. ESTIMATED START OF Date: **PROJECT**

ESTIMATED END OF Date: **PROJECT**

5. FUNDING

List the funding sources (including internal sources) and give the status of each source.

<i>Funding Body</i>	<i>Approved/Pending /To be submitted</i>
N/A	

If applicable, please identify date within which the funding body requires acceptance of award:

Date:

If the funding body requires ethical review of the research proposal at application for funding please provide date of deadline for funding application:

Date:

6. SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Describe the purpose, background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and expected outcomes. This description should be in everyday language that is free from jargon. Please explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases.

Purpose of the research

I am aiming to conduct an exploratory piece of research examining the decision-making processes used by social workers in the Local Authority in which I work when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in long-term foster care or adoption placements. I aim to use an Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004), looking at the information social workers focus on when faced with these decisions, if there are factors or pieces of information which are considered more important and thus pay more attention to, and the heuristics (simplification mechanisms) that they use to select and process the information presented to them. The Information Processing Approach also suggests that decision-making is influenced by contextual and cognitive limitations (Payne & Bettman, 2004); therefore, I also aim to explore the constraints in the environment (e.g. time, emotional costs, pressures of caseload, etc.) and in their cognitive abilities (e.g. limits of memory, processing capabilities, etc.) that may have an impact on their decision-making.

Background rationale

Following a recent OFSTED inspection, social workers in my Local Authority (LA) were questioned over the tools and methods they use when deciding whether siblings should be placed together or apart in long-term foster care or adoption placements. It emerged that there were no set guidelines or processes in place for making these potentially life-changing decisions. The social workers are now being encouraged to use the 'Together or Apart? Good Practice Guide' developed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (2008) to aid their decision-making. Aside from this publication, there appears to be little set guidance or tools available to aid Social Workers when making these potentially life-changing decisions. As well as being a current LA priority, the adoption process and foster-care arrangements have recently been under scrutiny by the Government and reforms to the current system have been suggested. The debate over whether siblings should remain together or apart has also featured in the popular media. In July 2012, the Government published a discussion paper calling for views on the placement of siblings in adoption and foster-care. Thus, the research I aim to conduct relates to current national, as well as LA, priorities.

Research Questions

- 1) What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?
- 2) What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?
- 3) What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

Expected Outcomes

I hope that the findings will lead to greater awareness of the complex nature of decision-making under these circumstances. It may also lead to the development of new guidelines for use within the LA and the identification of the 'key factors' to consider when making potentially life-changing decisions regarding the placement of siblings.

The findings are also relevant to the practice of Educational Psychologists, who may be required to make similarly complex decisions regarding the educational placement of children. Thus, a greater awareness of the psychological processes behind complex decision-making may be beneficial.

7. CONDUCT OF PROJECT

Please give a description of the research methodology that will be used

I will use a mixed methods design using a series of case studies to examine *how* these decisions are made by social workers.

I aim to carry out individual semi-structured interviews with a small sample of social workers (eight) from the Looked After Children team who have recently had to make a decision regarding the placement of siblings. The questions asked during these interviews will aim to explore how they made their decision and the processes involved. I believe that this method will provide high quality qualitative data, which other methods would not be able to provide.

I will also develop a questionnaire, asking the social workers questions regarding their approach to decision-making in general. This will allow me to gather some qualitative data which will complement the data collected from the interviews. This information will also allow me to offer suggestions for training and disseminating information regarding the psychology behind decision-making that may have an impact on their work.

Copies of the interview schedule and questionnaire will be forwarded to the Ethics Committee once they have been completed.

All aspects of the research will be completed in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) and will comply with the four principles outlined in this Code: respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, scientific value, social responsibility, and maximising benefit and minimising harm (p.37).

8. DOES THE PROJECT INVOLVE PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE OTHER THAN THE RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS?

Yes ☒ No ☐

Note: "Participation" includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour research).

If you have answered NO please go to Section 18 . If you have answered YES to this question please complete all the following sections.

9. PARTICIPANTS AS THE SUBJECTS OF THE RESEARCH

Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.

I aim to recruit eight participants to take part in the interviews. These will all be qualified social workers working in the Looked After Children (LAC) Team in the LA in which I work. It is likely that there will be a range of different ages within this sample, and a random number of males and females. All of these Social Workers are based within the same city, but may be from offices in different parts of the city.

The inclusion criteria will be that the social workers chose will have made at least one decision regarding the placement of siblings for adoption or long-term foster care within the past six months. This is to ensure that they can remember the details of the decisions which they made.

The questionnaire will be sent to all of the Social Workers within the LAC Team.

10. RECRUITMENT

Please state clearly how the participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Include any relationship between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student).

Note: Attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.

For the interviews I will use opportunity sampling: social workers who have recently attended a training event regarding sibling placement (unrelated to my research) will be given the opportunity to take part in an interview through email invitation.

The questionnaire will be emailed to all of the social workers in the LAC Team. Each social worker will then have the opportunity to opt in or opt out of the research.

The researcher will have no prior relationship with any of the participants.

11. CONSENT

a) Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain valid consent. If consent is not to be obtained explain why. If the participants are minors or for other reasons are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternate source of consent, including any permission / information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the consent.

Valid consent will be obtained in line with Section 4 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). Before the interviews take place, the social workers will be given verbal information regarding the nature and purpose of the research, consent, their right to withdraw and how their data will be stored and used. They will also be given a written consent form containing this information; the participants will be asked to sign this and will be given a copy of the form to keep.

For the questionnaires, participants will be sent an information sheet detailing the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time and how their data will be sent or used. By completing and sending back the questionnaire, participants will be indicating their consent to take part and they will be informed of this.

Note: Attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.

b) Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study? **Yes**
☐ **No** ☒

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and who will administer this feedback.

N/A

12. PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Explain what feedback/ information will be provided to the participants after participation in the research. (For example, a more complete description of the purpose of the research, or access to the results of the research).

Once the research has been completed, the findings will be presented to the key stakeholders of the research (the Head of the LAC Team and the Educational Psychology Service) and all of the participants will be given the opportunity to attend this presentation. The social workers who took part in the interviews will also be given time to ask any questions after the interview, and will be sent a letter of thanks for participating. Thus, appropriate debriefing will be offered in line with Section 8 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). The participants will also have the ability to access the complete Doctoral Thesis held by the University Learning Centre if they wish to.

13. PARTICIPANT WITHDRAWAL

a) Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project.

The participants will be informed both verbally and in writing (on the consent form) of their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

They will be given a copy of the consent form to keep; this will include details of how they can contact the researcher and withdraw their data after the interview has been conducted.

The consent form sent with the questionnaire will also detail this information.

b) Explain any consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study and indicate what will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw.

There will be no consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study.

However, if they wish to do so their data (recording of their interview, transcript of their interview and/or their completed questionnaire) will be destroyed.

During the interview, if the participant wishes to withdraw their comment or answer to a question, this will be noted and this section of the interview will not be transcribed. The consent form will explain this to the participants.

14. COMPENSATION

Will participants receive compensation for participation?

i) Financial

Yes

☐ No ☒

ii) Non-financial

Yes ☐ No

☒

If **Yes** to **either** i) or ii) above, please provide details.

N/A

If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

N/A

15. CONFIDENTIALITY

a) Will all participants be anonymous?

Yes

☒ No ☐

b) Will all data be treated as confidential?

Yes ☒ No

☐

Note: Participants' identity/data will be confidential if an assigned ID code or number is used, but it will not be anonymous. Anonymous data cannot be traced back to an individual participant.

Describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of data both during the conduct of the research and in the release of its findings.

Confidentiality will be maintained in line with Section 5 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010). The participants' names will not be included on their questionnaires or linked to their interviews. Each interview will be allocated a number, which only the researcher and the participant will know is linked to them. It is unlikely that participants could be identified from this anonymous data when it is transcribed and analysed. Data will not be shared with anyone (aside from the researcher) in its raw form. The transcripts, recordings and questionnaires will be kept in a secure filing cabinet in a locked LA office. Electronic data (the recordings) will be stored on a password protected, encrypted laptop.

Participants will also be informed that no information about what they have said during the interview will be passed on to anybody else, including their managers. This is to ensure that confidentiality is maintained, and also so that participants feel comfortable discussing their decisions.

During the interviews, the participants may wish to discuss a particular case that they have been involved in and had to make decisions about. Before the interview, they will be informed that if they wish to do this they must only use first names of the children or other people involved and give no identifying features such as location, dates of birth, and so on.

The first names of any children or other people discussed will be removed from the transcript and replaced by an initial (e.g. Rose will become 'R').

If participant anonymity or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, explain, providing details of how all participants will be advised of the fact that data will not be anonymous or confidential.

N/A

16. STORAGE, ACCESS AND DISPOSAL OF DATA

Describe what research data will be stored, where, for what period of time, the measures that will be put in place to ensure security of the data, who will have access to the data, and the method and timing of disposal of the data.

The recordings, transcripts and questionnaires will be kept by the researcher in a locked cabinet within a locked LA office and all electronic data will be stored on a password protected, encrypted laptop. The data will be stored for 10 years following completion of the research as is the policy for all personal data within the LA; after this time it will be destroyed.

Nobody other than the researcher will have access to the raw data.

17. OTHER APPROVALS REQUIRED? e.g. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks



YES



NO



NOT APPLICABLE

If yes, please specify.

The researcher should have a CRB check due to the nature of the topics that may be discussed. This is already in place (dated 2012) as the researcher is required to have one for her role.

Ethical clearance from the University of Birmingham and the LA in which the research will take place is also required.

18. SIGNIFICANCE/BENEFITS

Outline the potential significance and/or benefits of the research

The research may benefit the participants as it will draw their attention to key aspects of their own decision-making; this may help them with decision-making in the future. A greater awareness of the processes involved in decision-making may also be beneficial.

Potential benefits for the LA are that the research may help them to identify good practice and possibly develop tools to aid Social Workers when faced with this type of decision.

Potential benefits for the researcher and Educational Psychologists are that the research may highlight aspects of the decision-making process that are relevant to their role.

The research also offers a unique contribution to knowledge, as to date there appears to be no studies investigating this particular area.

19. RISKS

a) Outline any potential risks to **INDIVIDUALS**, including research staff, research participants, other individuals not involved in the research and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap

There are limited risks (as defined in Section 3 of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, 2010) to the individuals involved in the research.

One potential risk to the participants is that the interviews may uncover information of a sensitive or emotional nature which may lead to the participants doubting the decisions they have made regarding the placement of siblings. However, this is unlikely as the interview questions will be asked in a non-directive, exploratory way. Also, the researcher conducting the interviews has experience in dealing with potentially emotionally-laden conversations and sensitive information. Further support could be offered to the participants if necessary.

b) Outline any potential risks to **THE ENVIRONMENT and/or SOCIETY** and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.

None anticipated.

20. ARE THERE ANY OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES RAISED BY THE RESEARCH?

Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please specify

21. CHECKLIST

Please mark if the study involves any of the following:

- Vulnerable groups, such as children and young people aged under 18 years, those with learning disability, or cognitive impairments ☐
- Research that induces or results in or causes anxiety, stress, pain or physical discomfort, or poses a risk of harm to participants (which is more than is expected from everyday life) ☐
- Risk to the personal safety of the researcher ☐
- Deception or research that is conducted without full and informed consent of the participants at time study is carried out ☐
- Administration of a chemical agent or vaccines or other substances (including vitamins or food substances) to human participants. ☐

- Production and/or use of genetically modified plants or microbes ☐
- Results that may have an adverse impact on the environment or food safety ☐
- Results that may be used to develop chemical or biological weapons ☐

Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

	ATTACHED	NOT APPLICABLE
Recruitment advertisement	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant information sheet	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consent form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Questionnaire	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interview Schedule	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

22. DECLARATION BY APPLICANTS

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent.

I declare that:

- The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research (http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP_Research.pdf) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines.
- I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.
- I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.

Name of Principal investigator/project supervisor:
Date:

Please now save your completed form, print a copy for your records, and then email a copy to the Research Ethics Officer, at aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk. As noted above, please do not submit a paper copy.

APPENDIX 7

Example of transcribed interview

Interviewer: So, the first thing I need to check is: have you been involved in decision-making regarding the placement of siblings for adoption or long-term foster care?

Interviewee: Yes.

Ok – good start! I'm now going to give you two fictional scenarios to look at. While reading these in turn, I would like you to imagine that you have been given this as a case and you have been asked to think about whether the siblings should be placed together or apart. As you are reading, I would like you to 'think aloud' and tell me your initial thoughts. When you have finished each scenario, I would like you to tell me what your decision would be based on the information in the scenario.

Yep.

[Hands over Scenario 1]

[Unintelligible] [Reading silently] Ok.

Ok?

Yeah yeah.

Any thoughts?

Yeah, I think, my initial thought would be to, erm, undertake the parenting... erm, the 'Together or Apart assessment' to gain a better understanding of the dynamics within the family.

Ok.

Erm, certainly the children. Erm, and then also use research from 'RIP' (?) or 'CSci' (?). Erm, to evidence, erm, or back up information that you've gained really.

Ok.

My initial thoughts would be that, erm... let me get this right now... Erm... Jane... [Re-reading scenario] My initial thoughts were that maybe Lennie, potentially, depending on the outcome of the assessment, Lennie may potentially benefit from some time apart from his sister, er, because of the intense, you know, the attention-seeking, and Jane's happy to, you know, to play on her own. Erm, and it might be that Lennie would benefit from a short period apart, so he can learn those skills, how to share, how to play, how to interact, without actually, erm, attention-seeking. Erm... but I'm always cautious with the words 'attention-seeking' because of, erm, actually what they're trying to do is tell us, tell us some information, and whether that be positive or negative, then you have to be very mindful of that it could be they're trying

to tell us of an incident that's happened through their behaviours, which some people may see as attention-seeking. So I'm always very careful with that.

Yep.

So, my initial feelings to this one is I would keep them together, and erm... I feel that sibling assessment be undertaken through the BAAF 'Together or Apart?', assess that details and also potentially some family support work to be undertaken with individually, with Lennie and with Jane, and then potentially jointly as well.

Ok.

So there's a wrap-around service around, er, the children.

Ok.

And also, erm, support to be given to the carers as well, of the work that you're doing.

Ok. So why, why have you come to that decision?

Erm... I think, for me, I always... where practicably possible, siblings together, erm, or families together, coz I've got a siblings group of.... six, and sibling group of eight, and they've all been separated because of behaviours and dynamics. Erm... and I've also got a sibling group of three, and when I took over that case, their previous social worker thought they should be separated because of behaviours, but actually by being kept together, coz I didn't agree with that care plan, so I've kept them together... They're actually starting to, erm, form positive relationships and for me that's what I'd like to see if we can achieve here .

However, it would have to be constantly reviewed, erm, because if it was detrimental to one or both's emotional wellbeing, physical, social development, then we would have to consider separating, so it's a constant, sort of, dual tracking process really, which could lead to being together or could also lead to separation.

Ok, thank you. I've got a second scenario for you to read, so, same again, initial thoughts, what you think and finally what your decision would be and why you've made that decision.

[Reading] Ok.

Ok?

Yeah yeah. Erm, on the surface, erm, for me the three girls would remain together.

Ok.

Erm, I think their relationships, erm, that they've got, are appropriate. I think, if anything, there needs to be some family support work undertaken to explore with them their own identities, and why... why there's that dependency on each other. Erm, and also to undertake some confidence and self-esteem work with them. From reading the detail in, in the erm presentation, for me, it feels that they are very tight, they are very trusting of each other, erm, not that that attachment needs to be broken, but if it could be, erm... if the girls could be enabled to, erm, to also create their own confidence and self-esteem so they can be dependent on their own feelings and emotions, and be in tune with those emotions like they are for their sister, I think that would be a way forward in this case.

Ok.

Erm, and I'd certainly keep them together.

Ok, thank you,. Erm, now just a few questions... So, next question is, have you ever received any training specifically related to sibling assessment?

Erm, I wouldn't call it training, what I would say is that I had a, erm, I've had many a detailed conversation with Simon, erm, before I engage in the sibling 'Together or Apart?' assessment, and I've also read the details of that. Simon, as well, in my first, erm, undertaking of this assessment, supported me, came out on my visits, to make sure that I was, erm, asking the right questions, that the detail was documented, erm, correctly, and he also supported me with the writing of the report – I wrote the report, but Simon, erm, checked it over, clarified, asked me questions about why I'd put that information in, just so that I understood what I'd wrote and he understood what I'd wrote. So in that sense, I've been, erm, greatly supported, erm, but I haven't been on the BAAF training to say that this is how it should be done. Erm, but I feel that with Simon's support, I think that I've got it right.

Ok. Do you use any particular assessment tools when you are faced with these decisions?

Yeah, I've got the, erm you know, the, you've seen the 'Together or Apart?' assessment, yeah? In the back is the questions, so I've used that as well. Erm, so those tools that I use. Also, from, erm, when I was writing my reports, I looked at 'Research in Practice' material, I also looked at 'SCIE' material as well and I've also, erm, had a... I used David Howe's book on attachment, and I also used one of, I can't remember, one of Wilson's books, Social Work Practice as well. So that's how I, erm, use my tools.

Ok, what are the 'SCIE' materials?

Erm – Social Care Institute, Social Care Institute for Excellence website, and it's just a wealth of research and information on there, and social work practice. Great website.

I haven't heard of that.

If you just type into Social Care Excellence, Social Care Institute Excellence, one work – SCIE, and it goes... and it's brilliant. It's a great website.

What factors do you consider to be important when making these kinds of decisions regarding the placement of siblings?

If I was to separate or to keep together...?

I think for me it's about looking at the emotional impact on the children if you are to separate, and actually are they going to benefit from separation or are they not. You're looking at the social aspect as well, and, erm, socially are they gonna be able to manage the transition into another placement being separated. You've also gotta look at the, erm, the health aspect, in terms of their you know, the impact on them physically, erm, as well. Erm, also the contact arrangements, so if you were, erm, of you do choose to separate, you know, what, so how's contact going to work, what capacity and also if we're looking at separation, are we looking at separation permanently or are we looking at temporary with a view to rehabilitating back together. Erm, the factors in keeping them together, you're looking at their relationships, their bond, the... in either or really, but you're looking at their relationships, their bond, their attachments towards each other, their responses to each other, erm, their intuition, erm, their willingness to be... are they able to show sympathy or, erm, or empathy, erm, and also as well you're looking at here, you know, you're looking at... if you are looking to separate is there any sexual behaviours, is there any scapegoating, is there any bullying, intent of bullying, is there a blame culture, coz I know in one particular family that I've worked with, that recently found out that actually probably, you know, the young lad should have been removed much earlier because he was just the scapegoat for everything that family did, erm, and information appears to the point that he is the one that is significantly, erm, delayed, not only academically, but also in his, all of his behaviours as well.

Ok. What other people, if any, would influence your decision-making?

Erm, I gathered information from the carer, from the children, from the carer's family, school, independent reviewing officer, erm... health visitor, nurse, so I'd lots of input from, erm, from many professionals really. Erm, which was great coz it made, it gave such an holistic, erm... picture of what happened, and, you know, what the children had been through, erm... what the children... how the children had progressed, and

coz I was able to show what was in the review, and everybody was like able to chip in, it was brilliant. So I had multi-agency...

Yeah, lots of people...

Massive amounts of information.

Ok. What do you perceive as making the decision-making process more difficult?

Erm... for me, sometimes it's about separating my professional emotions and personal emotions. Coz I'm a big softie!

And, and sometimes... I guess that because my, my family adopted so, I think... you know, I've got an adopted brother and... Erm, and we were able to keep him within the family, it was an inter-family adoption, erm... so I have to go back to what I said earlier and remember that... the reasons why I'm doing it, coz sometimes I can get a bit, erm, my emotions can, erm... have to be careful that my emotions don't become crossed – and I need to separate the professional from the personal, and can make sure that I do that. Erm, because I don't like, you know, I don't like the fact that they probably come to, come to LAC, they've been separated from parents, and, erm, sometimes, you know, I've got parents who are engaging greatly with us and I've got parents who have just waved their hands and said goodbye, we're not doing no more. So for it to happen again, and create even more loss and separation, that's what I find hard with them. They're my decisions and sometimes I have to battle with myself and write it down, and go 'this is what I'm doing' and I can reflect and move forward.

Ok. Do you think there is anything else that makes it difficult, or is that the main...?

I think that... no... I guess obviously nationally there is a lack of placements, in foster placement nationally. And I've only been with (LA) now since March 2012 and there's, I think, over a hundred more children in care in (LA) in that time. Erm, also if you want to move a child you've got to complete what they call a 'placement information record' – it's an essential document, there's no doubt in that, it's just a massive document, erm, and sometimes it... when it's updated it can take over an hour to do, an hour and a half to do. And, erm, so there is a time issue as well and then obviously if you are separating, you've gotta be, you know, you've got to be approaching a reviewing officer and, you know, do you agree with this? And getting their views as well... Erm, so I guess time is a factor.

Yep.

Erm, or a pressure. Erm, then you've got to find a placement, identify a placement, erm with the placements team. Again, that takes time... Erm, there's also, you know, finding carers out there who who have the special... special... specialities to actually

achieve what you want to achieve for this young person, is the young person able to achieve it as well? Erm, apart from, no... you know, coz I'm well supported out there, so erm, yeah whether I can knock on my line manager's, or Sasha's... or they're the kind of things... I can run past Simon – so there's an abundance of support out there – so I don't find too many challenges in the sense of, of erm, of where to go for support or just to, just to run things past people, say 'yeah, you're fine – just crack on, trust yourself.'

Ok, that's good. Evidence from research suggests people are more likely to make a decision if they've made that decision before. Do you agree with this, and do you think that that might influence your decision-making?

I guess there's an element, of you've made a decision before, you feel more confident the second time round. However, I don't necessarily agree with it, as it has to be based on each individual family and each individual family is completely different. I've got twenty-eight cases, twenty-eight children, and some sibling groups, and each of those children are massively different – you can't base decisions on past experience, you've gotta base it on the evidence that's before you and that's how I work. Using the evidence base that's before me, and erm, and I make a decision on what I feel is in the best interest of the child which means their needs, and hopefully can improve outcomes. Can't do it on past experience, it doesn't help.

Ok. Research also suggests that people are more likely to make a decision if other people are making similar or the same decisions. Do you agree with this, and do you think that this might influence your decision-making?

Who's done this research!? No, I disagree with that – again, it goes back to my previous answer – you can't, good practice would tell you that you don't make other decisions which, you know, if it works for one, it may not necessarily... you're looking at different circumstances, different family dynamics, no I can't agree with that.

Erm... No, no. I can be quite stubborn when I want to be. Erm, but no, it's about having the information in front of you and if we, if, if we disagree with the outcome, then there has to be erm, negotiation, there has to be, erm, a discussion of why. And then there has to be reasoning behind that decision, and logic, so that we can reach positive outcomes. Erm and that's not saying, going back to the support earlier, I could go to Sasha my line manager and say 'look, this is what I feel that should happen and these are the reasons why' – which she may say, 'why this? and this, have you considered this factor?' and I might turn around and go 'no, actually' and that may influence my decision because that may change circumstances slightly. So, erm, no I, I can be influenced in the sense that, through detailed discussion, which evidence has positive outcomes and yes, but not someone saying 'oh, I did it this way - give it a go'. No. No, not at all.

Ok. Research also suggests that people who are required to make a decision quickly and efficiently often make decisions based on one key reason alone. Do you agree with this, and do you think that this might influence your decision-making?

Read me that one again, coz that's tickled me a little bit! Go on.

[Repeats question]

No, coz there's normally many factors that, there'd be many factors of why I may start, you know, I've recently said that, erm, a young boy won't have any contact with his, with his mother and his father. Now the key factors there, here, is that dad has not seen child since June 2012 and has not made contact with me as he was instructed to, erm... And now his mom said his whereabouts are unknown, so there's three factors there before you even start. In terms of contact with, with his mum, is that erm, she has said 'I can't cope with my children being Looked After no more', especially because five of the six are going to be adopted – so there's two factors there. So there's the adoption and, so for me there's never just one sole reason – if you look at all the cases that you work, there'll be many, many factors. You can't make it one decision.

Ok.

If it's Child Protection or safeguarding possibly, if there's an allegation of sexual abuse. Of course. Physical abuse and emotional abuse, neglect. They could be your four key factors, but with each key factor, there'll be many, many more reasons along the way. That's how I think. So the key factors, then you've got the four elements, but then you've got many, many underlying things...

The last three questions relate to what we call in psychology, 'heuristics'. Heuristics are simplification mechanisms or mental shortcuts that research has shown help us make decisions. Can you think of any other heuristics or mental shortcuts that might apply to your decision-making?

Yeah. One strategy that I probably use is that, erm, I openly talk about cases to, to my colleagues. Erm, in particular my line manager. Erm, and that might be, you know, a confidence things with me, erm, or just me saying 'am I doing this right?' Erm, so I think that's one strategy that I use when I, you know, when I need to make, erm, decisions. Erm... I guess the other thing that I do is that erm, I'll discuss it with the, you know, the carers and if it's age appropriate I'll, I'll have a chat with the kids as well. Erm, strategies that are unconscious... I ponder! I sit and ponder!

Yeah.

And it can look like I'm in a daydream. Erm, and I'll think things through and reflect on incidents which have happened, maybe six months ago. Erm, I'll also look,

sometimes I'll look at my observations or what I've wrote and I'll review paperwork or a care plan. Erm, so I think my main one is, my main two that I can think of now, is that I'll ponder, erm... Probably doing what I'm doing now actually, rubbing my chin! Erm, I probably do that for lots! And then I'll also run it past... 'What do you think to this idea? This, this is the situation, what do you think?' Just gain, coz I think that's what's great about having the team that I work with is that we're all open to listening to each other and offering ideas and support, to enable better outcomes for the young people. So yeah, I do do that as well.

And it's... They'll probably argue out there that 'yeah he is confident, he just needs to do it' but it's just that, erm, it's almost like when you go to, to your line manager or a colleague, and you say 'what do you think about that?' – it's like, it's just getting approval I guess. Erm, and we all do that. Maybe, I dunno if that's a subconscious thing or if it's something that I'm just , just doing... I don't know.

Ok. And is there anything else that you'd like to add that you think you haven't said about your decision-making?

No, I can't... I try and keep... I always try and keep it rational, logical and evidence-based. If it's evidence-based , then it's rational and logical, then I think you can stand there and say 'this is why I did it' – if it has no evidence base, if it has no theory behind it, erm, then you, you're gonna come a cropper, and you're gonna make errors and it's the young people that suffer long, erm, long-term. Erm, and if I can continue to practise like, in that way, erm, in the years to come, then hopefully we'll have some positive outcomes for the kids.

APPENDIX 8

Example of a 'reduced' interview

Outline for Interview 1

Vignette 1

- Together or Apart assessment
- To understand family dynamics
- Would want the children's views
- Could use RIP (Research in Practice) or SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence)
- Lennie would benefit from time apart
- He is attention-seeking
- Jane is happy to play on her own
- Lennie needs to learn social skills
- Keep them together
- Sibling assessment using Together or Apart assessment
- Family support work for children and carers
- Prefer to keep siblings together
- Previous case – group of 8 siblings, separated because of behaviour
- Previous case – 3 siblings, previous social worker thought they should be separated – I thought they should be kept together, not starting to form positive relationships
- Need to be reviewed
- Could be detrimental to one child, might need to consider separating

Vignette 2

- Keep them together
- Age appropriate relationships
- Need family support work to explore own identities
- Confidence and self-esteem work
- Trusting relationship
- Help them become more in tune with own emotions
- Keep them together

Question 1

- Haven't had training
- Detailed conversation with a colleague
- Read Together or Apart assessment
- Colleague supported me with first sibling assessment and writing report
- Feel supported

- Haven't been on training

Question 2

- Together or Apart assessment
- Research in Practice materials
- SCIE material and website – wealth of information
- Book on attachment
- Social work practice book

Question 3

- Emotional impact on children if you separate
- Would they benefit from this?
- Social impact
- Health aspect, physical impact
- Contact arrangements
- Relationships, their bond, attachment, responses to each other, intuition, sympathy or empathy
- Separate of any sexual behaviours, scapegoating, bullying, blame culture
- Previous case – lad should have been removed earlier as he was scapegoat for family, he was significantly delayed academically and behaviourally

Question 4

- Carer
- Carer's family
- School
- Independent Reviewing Officer
- Health visitor
- Nurse
- Lots of professionals – holistic picture, multi-agency

Question 5

- Professional vs. personal emotions
- My family adopted, got an adopted brother, inter-family adoption
- Emotions can become crossed
- Need to separate personal and professional
- Already separated from parents
- More loss and separation – hard
- Have to battle with myself
- Write it down, reflect and move forward
- Lack of foster placements nationally

- Increasing numbers of LAC
- Placement Information Record – essential, massive, takes a long time
- Time issue
- Approaching Reviewing Officer – time is a factor
- Finding a placement
- Finding carers who can help child
- Line manager/colleague can support
- Not too many challenges – support is there

Question 6

- If you've made decision before – more confident
- Don't necessarily agree
- All families are different
- 28 cases, 28 children – all different
- Can't base decision on past experiences
- Got to look at evidence
- Look at what's in best interest of child

Question 7

- No – I disagree
- Same as previous answer
- You're looking at different circumstances, different family
- No I can't agree with that
- I can be stubborn
- Having information in front of you
- Negotiation if disagreement
- Reasoning behind the decision
- Could talk to line manager
- May influence my decision if she questions me
- Could be influenced by discussion and evidence

Question 8

- No – many factors
- Young boy won't have contact with parents
- Key factors – dad not seen him since 2012, no contact with me
- Mom says whereabouts are unknown
- That's 3 factors
- Mom couldn't cope, 5 out of 6 children being adopted – 2 more factors
- Never just one reason, many factors
- Child Protection/safeguarding issues, sexual abuse, physical or emotional abuse or neglect – might be significant factor

Question 9

- Talk to colleagues about cases, line manager
- Might be my confidence
- Discuss it with carers and children
- Pondering – reflect on incidents, look at observations and notes, review paperwork
- Run it past colleagues
- We all listen to each other, offer ideas and support

Question 10

- No
- Try and be rational, logical and evidence-based
- Can defend your decisions
- Achieve positive outcomes

APPENDIX 9

Potential themes

Research Question 1: Key pieces of information

Family dynamics

Children and their individual needs (inc. one child's needs)

Negative/poor behaviours, negative relationships

Detrimental effects of separating

Positive factors, positive relationships

All cases are different

Views of other professionals

Research Question 2: Constraints

Own emotions

Own values

Lack of placements, finding appropriate placement

Paperwork / bureaucracy

Time pressure

No/limited training

Changing information

Lack of research/evidence/guidance

Costs/funding

Other's (differing) values

Lack of experience

Caseload/workload

Research Question 3: Who else influences decision-making?

Carer

Parents

Children

School staff (teachers, dinnerladies)

Independent Reviewing Officer

Health professionals

Colleagues / other social workers

Psychologists

Contact supervisors / Family support workers

Research and evidence

Support from colleague

Theories (inc. attachment theory)

Work with children (My World/Wishes and feelings)

Guidance (i.e. that siblings should be kept together)

Importance of assessment

Appendix 10: Public Domain Briefing

Together or apart? An analysis of social workers' decision-making when considering the placement of siblings for adoption or foster care.

Context

This research was carried out as part of the three year professional training programme in Applied Educational and Child Psychology at the University of Birmingham. It took place in XXXXX Local Authority (LA), where I was employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist during the second and third years of my training.

Introduction

The statutory guidance within the UK is that siblings should be placed together, unless this would not be in the best interests of one or more of the sibling group, or there is a good reason not to (Department for Education, 2012a). If it is deemed necessary to separate siblings, guidance in the UK suggests that the reasons why should be clearly documented and reviewed, with judgments based on an assessment of the relationships and consideration of individual circumstances (DfE, 2012a).

Herrick and Piccus (2005) estimated that over two thirds of children in care have siblings, but almost half of these are separated from at least one of their siblings. Within the body of research conducted to date that has focused specifically on siblings in care, the findings have been inconclusive (DfE, 2012a). Some studies have noted better outcomes for siblings placed together; others noted better outcomes for those placed separately; others found no difference in outcomes when comparing those placed together with those placed apart (Hegar, 2005).

Evidence tends to suggest tentatively that placing siblings together generally results in better outcomes for the children. However, in families where there are high levels of sibling conflict or aggression, or in those where the children have experienced significant trauma or abuse, it may be better for siblings to be placed separately. It would seem that social workers faced with making decisions about sibling placement have a difficult task, where the individual circumstances of each child need to be considered.

I decided that it would be useful to explore social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings using a psychological framework. The Information Processing Approach summarised by Payne and Bettman (2004) is a 'theoretical and methodological framework' (p. 110) for examining human decision-making. It is a descriptive theory, as it focuses on *how* decisions are made. This approach focuses mainly on the cognitive aspects of human decision-making, but also takes into account emotional and motivational aspects which may have an impact on the final

decision. It also takes into account the environmental context, including the social or cultural aspects, such as the influence of other people.

Constraints in the environment which may influence decision-making include factors such as time, emotional costs, and pressures of workload. Constraints in cognitive abilities include factors such as limits of memory, processing capabilities, and lack of knowledge. The Information Processing Approach suggests that these constraints influence human decision-making; therefore, any research exploring how humans make decision, using this approach, must examine these factors and their influence. This approach suggests that, due to these constraints, we are highly selective about the pieces of information that we pay attention to (Payne & Bettman, 2004), as we cannot always process all of the information presented to us.

Another central idea proposed by the Information Processing Approach is that, as humans are 'bounded' by constraints in the environment and the mind, our capacity to process information is limited (Payne & Bettman, 2004). Therefore, when faced with a complex decision, where there is a lot of information to process, we rely on heuristics, or simplification mechanisms to help us make a decision. These heuristics can be thought of as 'mental shortcuts' that allow us to make decisions when experiencing constraints such as limited time or memory for information; they also allow us to make decisions quickly, with limited effort (Payne & Bettman, 2004).

Examples of heuristics:

Heuristic	Description
Confidence heuristic	The decision-maker chooses an option based on the confidence with which this option is presented by an advisory individual.
Familiarity heuristic	The decision-maker chooses the option that matches with decisions they have made in the past.
Social proof heuristic	The decision-maker selects the option that other people are selecting.
Take-the-best heuristic	One-reason decision-making; selecting the most valid option, but if that does not help them decide between the options, moving on to the next most valid option, and so on.

Payne and Bettman (2004) suggest that people use heuristics when there is no other option due to limited time or cognitive capacity to make the decision, when there would be a cost in terms of time and effort if the individual made the decision without using some sort of shortcut, or when a particular heuristic has worked in the past, resulting in a satisfactory outcome, and is readily available in the person's memory.

The Information Processing Approach appears to provide a good framework that aids our understanding of human decision-making. It seemed particularly relevant to the types of decision that I wished to explore further (i.e. the decision-making of social workers regarding sibling placement), as when people are required to make complex

decisions such as these, it is likely that their attentional processing capacity will be limited due the vast amount of information available to them, coupled with the likelihood that there will be constraints in their environment, such as time pressures, paperwork and high caseloads. In these situations, I propose that it is likely that social workers will rely on heuristics to some extent to aid their decision-making.

Research aim

The research study aimed to use the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004) to explore the decision-making of social workers when they are considering whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or foster care placements.

Research questions

Four research questions were developed, following a review of the relevant literature:

1. What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?
2. What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?
3. Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?
4. What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a sample of six social workers, who had volunteered to take part in this study. The interviews included two vignettes, or short scenarios, which described two different sets of siblings. They were asked to 'think aloud' and make a decision regarding whether the siblings described should be kept together or apart. They were then asked a series of questions regarding their decision-making in this area.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysed using inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). This involved looking for themes and identifying the use of heuristics in the social workers' responses.

This research had full ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Birmingham.

Key findings

1. What key pieces of information do social workers attend to when faced with these decisions?

The findings suggest that there are a number of key pieces of information that social workers attend to when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings: the individual needs of the children within the sibling group, the positive aspects of the sibling relationship, the

negative aspects of the sibling relationship and the potentially detrimental effects of separation.

2. What constraints do social workers face when making these decisions?

The findings suggest that social workers face a number of constraints when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoption or foster care placements. At the individual level, most of the social workers reflected on their own lack of experience in making decisions in this area, as well as the constraining effect of their own emotions and personal beliefs which often led them to perceive making the decision as a difficult process. Their personal experiences of the sibling relationship, such as with their own siblings or with their own children, also acted as a constraining factor in that it appeared to lead them towards keeping siblings together and influenced their personal values regarding siblings.

At a systemic level, most of the social workers commented on the lack of training regarding assessing sibling relationships, and felt that this constrained their decision-making, as they did not always know where to start in the assessment process. Other constraints at a systemic level included the pressures of having a high number of cases and an increasing workload, which was also affected by the strict timescales within which decisions regarding the placement of siblings often need to be made. Paperwork and bureaucracy were also mentioned as potential constraints, along with the lack of available placements, particularly for large sibling groups, which has been commented on in the literature as a national issue DfE (2012b).

3. Which people, if any, influence social workers' decision-making?

The findings illustrate that several people may influence as social workers' decision-making regarding the placement of siblings. For example, the social workers mentioned the wishes and feelings of the children themselves, their carers, their biological parents, and a range of other professionals including other social care colleague, health professionals, staff in schools, family support workers who often supervise the contact between siblings and parents, and so on.

The social worker also noted the importance of assessment when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart. As part of the assessment process, all of the social workers mentioned at least one tool that they would use that would involve gathering the views of other individuals. The social workers also appeared to be influenced by the authors of published guidance, theory and research related to this area. This tended to guide them through the assessment and decision-making process.

4. What heuristics (simplification mechanisms), if any, do social workers rely on when making these decisions?

The findings suggest that social workers may rely on a number of heuristics when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings. There was evidence to suggest that some of the social workers relied on the 'confidence heuristic' by allowing their decision to be guided

by another individual (a senior colleague) who was perceived as more confident, and perhaps competent, in the decision-making area.

The 'familiarity heuristic' may also influence a social worker's decision-making. The findings showed that all of the social workers reflected on past cases that they had been involved in, and several made links between their past cases and the cases described in the vignettes. This heuristic may be used by social workers when they are faced with making a decision regarding a group of siblings who share similar characteristics to another sibling group that they have worked with in the past.

All of the social workers made reference to gathering and considering the views of others as part of the decision-making process. This suggests that they are using the 'social proof heuristic', where they make a decision based upon the decisions that other people are making.

Due to the complex nature of the decision regarding the placement of siblings, there was little evidence that suggested the social workers used the 'take-the-best heuristic', where they based their decision on one key 'best' reason. However, when factors such as sexual abuse, reliving traumatic events and scapegoating were evident in the sibling relationship, social workers may be more likely to base their decision on this one key reason, and would decide to separate the siblings. It may be that when one extremely negative factor, such as these, is evident, the social worker is more likely to rely on the take-the-best heuristic.

There was also evidence to suggest that social workers may make a decision using the 'affect heuristic', where their decision was based upon their feelings.

Implications for practice of social workers

The findings suggest that social workers are selective about what pieces of information they attend to when faced with a decision regarding the placement of siblings. This has implications for their practice, as important elements may be missed if they do not attend to all of the information available to them. Therefore it may be useful to raise social workers' awareness of the types of information that they may be more likely to attend to, whilst also encouraging them to look outside of this key information that has been highlighted in the present study.

The findings also suggest that social workers face a number of challenges or constraints when making decisions regarding the placement of siblings for adoption or in foster care. It is hoped that the present research study would provide social workers with a greater understanding of the complex nature of human decision-making and the factors that may influence them. With this awareness, it may be that social workers can reflect more effectively on their decision-making, and note where their own emotions, experiences or beliefs, or environmental constraints, may be having an influence. When considering the impact of systemic constraints on decision-making, the present study highlights possible implications for reducing caseloads and lengthening timescales for social workers involved in this area of work.

The findings suggested that social workers consider the views of a range of other people during the decision-making process. This has implications for their practice as it is important that they use their own professional judgment to make decisions rather than being solely guided by other people. In particular, emphasis should be placed on increasing social workers' confidence and capacity to make these decisions independently to some extent.

The findings suggested that social workers may rely on a range of heuristics during the decision-making process. This may be positive, as research is beginning to emerge that suggests that the use of heuristics can lead to positive outcomes in complex decision situations. However, Payne and Bettman (2004) noted that the use of heuristics led to 'satisfactory solutions'. This may have implications for the practice of social workers in this particular area of decision-making, as only 'satisfactory' outcomes may be less than desirable in relation to children and sibling groups. It would be difficult to prevent social workers from using heuristics during their decision-making, as they tend to be unconscious and appear to be part of all humans' decision-making (Payne & Bettman, 2004). However, it may be beneficial to offer training to social workers to raise their awareness of heuristics and their impact on human decision-making, so that they may become more conscious of their own use of these and the impact that they can have on their decision-making.

Another key issue which this research study has highlighted is the lack of training that social workers receive regarding the assessment of sibling relationships. This is something that all of the social workers interviewed drew attention to, and all reflected that they would welcome additional training. Most described how they had 'trained themselves' through seeking the advice and support of a more experienced colleague. However, it may be appropriate for the British Association of Adoption or Fostering, the Social Care Institute of Excellence, or other relevant professional bodies to recognise this issue and work closely with training providers to ensure that social workers receive training regarding how to assess sibling relationships, what would be considered a 'normal' sibling relationship and how best to support the vulnerable groups of siblings that enter the care system.

Implications for practice of educational psychologists

The findings of the present research study and the literature review also have implications for the practice of educational psychologists (EPs). For example, EPs may have a wider knowledge of relevant psychological theories relating to attachment, social development, antisocial and prosocial behaviour and mental health than their social work colleagues. EPs could also play a role in promoting awareness of factors involved in complex decision-making, and in supporting other professionals with the emotional and personal impact of this area of work through supervision. EPs may be well-placed to provide support and advice for social workers who are faced with these complex decisions.

The present findings also have relevance to the decision-making of EPs. EPs are also required to engage in assessment and complex decision-making, such as deciding whether a child or young person would be best placed within a mainstream school or within a more specialist educational provision. It is likely that EPs decision-making is similarly affected by

the factors that this study has shown affect social workers' decision-making, and those outlined by the Information Processing Approach (Payne & Bettman, 2004).

Directions for future research

The literature review and findings from the present study have highlighted a number of directions for future research:

- The utility of the existing resources available for social workers to use when deciding whether to place siblings together or apart in adoptive or foster care placements, such as Lord and Borthwick (2008). At present, this particular resource may be useful for social workers, but there is no evidence base to suggest that its use leads to better decision-making or more positive outcomes for the siblings involved.
- Social workers' decision-making in other areas of practice, such as when deciding whether to remove children from their parents' care and place them into the care of the LA. It would be interesting to explore whether the factors influencing their decision-making were similar to those described in the present study.
- EPs decision-making, particularly in complex areas such as regarding the best educational placement for a child or young person. It would be interesting to investigate whether EPs are influenced by similar factors as social workers, or whether there is a difference in their approach.

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